ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
9
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

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The
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SHIZUN
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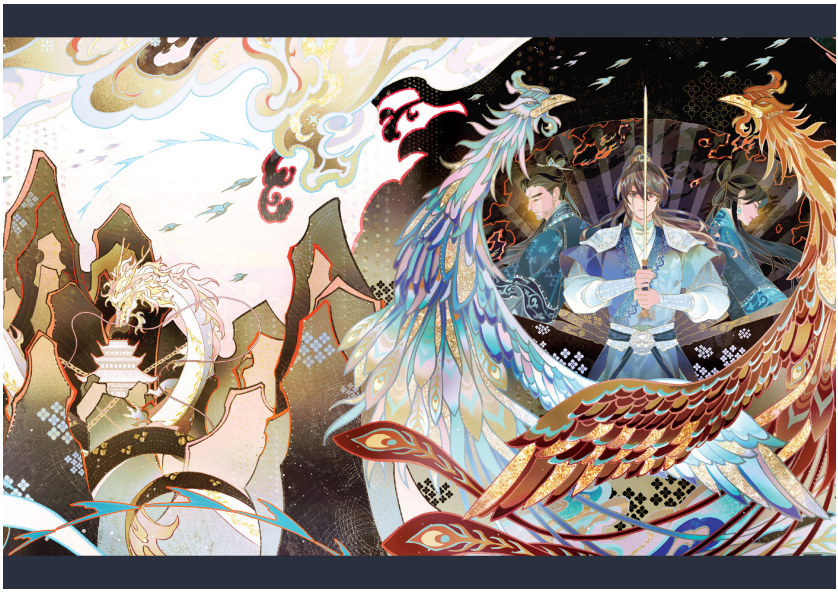

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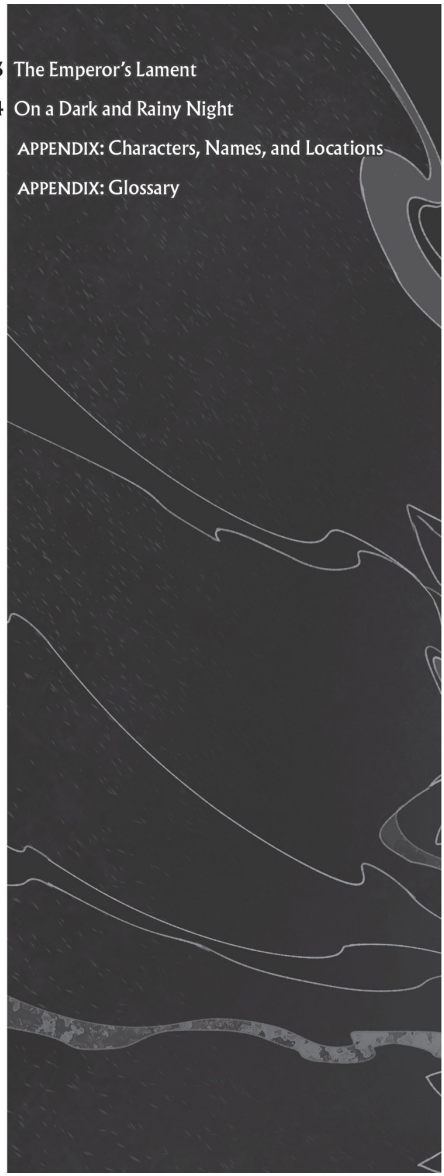

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Chapter 270:
Judgment Day

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED in the blink of an eye. At dawn on the third, Shi Mei came to the secret chamber.

Taxian-jun was already dressed, his tall, broad-shouldered figure clad in his ever-present black robes and combat armor. A gleaming silver compartment for hidden weapons was fastened at his slender waist. He wore black dragonskin gloves, beneath which were strapped several more concealed weapons.

He looked up at Shi Mei's entrance, his gaze cold. "You came."

"Get ready—we're going to Tianyin Pavilion."

"This venerable one is ready. Let's go."

Shi Mei assessed him. "What about Chu Wanning?"

"I gave him the medicine. He's asleep."

Despite nodding, Shi Mei stepped further into the room to check, Taxian-jun right on his heels. After taking Chu Wanning's pulse, Shi Mei said, "He'll recover his strength over the next few days. We should be careful."

Taxian-jun was unintimidated by Chu Wanning's strength. "What about his memories?" he asked.

Shi Mei shot him a glance. "He'll recover his memories too."

Ignoring Taxian-jun's look of displeasure, Shi Mei rose to his feet. He lit some tranquilizing incense and set it to diffuse through the room, preventing Chu Wanning from waking and disrupting his plans. Finally he stepped out of the room and cast a powerful ward on the door.

Taxian-jun furrowed his brow. "Why bother? The mountain's deserted except for Nangong Liu, and he thinks he's a child. There's no one to break him out."

"A thief in the family is hardest to guard against," came Shi Mei's impassive reply.

"Who?"

"Nobody you've met." Shi Mei sighed. "But someone I know very, very well. Enough. Let's go."

The two of them departed, leaving Chu Wanning alone in the austere stone chamber. He was unconscious again, his mind sifting

through the memories of two lifetimes.

Yet that wasn't all. Even Shi Mei hadn't realized the true reason Chu Wanning's recovery was so drawn out. It wasn't because his physical health was poor: It was because the memories he was recovering weren't limited to his own. For as long as half of his earth soul had inhabited Mo Ran's body, it had mingled with Mo Ran's souls, day in and day out. When this soul fragment returned at last to Chu Wanning, it brought with it many of Mo Ran's deepest memories.

At that moment, these memories were flooding Chu Wanning's mind, filling his dreams with shattered fragments of the past.

First he dreamed of a disheveled child in a mass grave. The child was wailing over a woman's decayed corpse, his face a mess of tears and snot.

"Mom… Mom! Someone, anyone… Help, come and bury me too! Please, bury me too…"

He dreamed of the House of Drunken Jade in Xiangtan. Mo Ran, beaten black and blue, curled up in a cage meant for a dog. A golden beast-shaped burner filled with resin incense had been left in the warm room, suffusing the air with heavy fragrance. The child locked in the cage had nothing to eat or drink; he didn't even have enough space to turn around.

In the room was another boy of similar age. He leered at Mo Ran: "Look at you now—still want to play the hero? Well I say you're nothing but a joke! Pah! You'll never be anything but a pathetic joke!"

Spittle flew at him, and the young Mo Ran closed his eyes. Chu Wanning's lashes trembled too.

Mo Ran…

He dreamed of dancing flames, writhing through the building like vengeful ghosts. Shouts and cries echoed through the halls as the burning rafters collapsed one after another. Someone screamed in the billowing black smoke.

The teenaged Mo Ran sat within the towering fire, looking down with a stony expression. A bloodstained machete lay across his lap, and he was slowly peeling a bunch of grapes.

"Mom, it's over." Mo Ran appeared exceedingly calm. "But I won't get to see you again… I've killed people. My hands are covered in blood. I'll go to hell when I die, Mom. I won't see you ever again."

Mo Ran… Mo Ran…

The scene before him brightened. Chu Wanning saw a woman with soft features and eyes that sloped gently upward at their outer

corners.

Who was she?

Her face bore some slight resemblance to his own, Chu Wanning thought. A likeness especially clear when she looked down in earnest concentration as she mended a coarsely woven garment.

"Mama…" a child called, soft as a mosquito's buzz.

The woman looked up, then flashed a smile. "What are you doing up?"

"I had a bad dream. My tummy hurts—I'm hungry…"

The woman put down the garment and opened her arms. "Another bad dream?" She chuckled softly. "Don't be afraid, Ran-er. Mama will hold you."

Ran-er… Mo Ran…

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. His heart was seized by an ache he couldn't put into words—it hurt too much. The scene he saw seemed a bleak and spartan existence, one of interminable suffering.

Mama…

It was the first time Chu Wanning had seen Mo Ran's mother. Suddenly, he understood why little Mo Ran had instinctively grabbed at his hem outside Wubei Temple, trusting him, begging him for succor. He understood why that same youth had walked up to him before the Heaven-Piercing Tower and implored him to be his teacher.

The young man then had said with a smile, "Because he looks the nicest and gentlest."

Back then, everyone had laughed at Mo Ran behind his back, calling him blind, a shameless suck-up. But that wasn't true. It wasn't true at all…

He wasn't blind or a suck-up. But he couldn't speak the truth out loud; he couldn't make a scene or take Chu Wanning's hand and tell him, *Xianjun, when you glance downward, you remind me of the person who loved me more than anyone else in this world. But she's gone, so could you please pay attention to me—could you please spare me another glance in her stead?*

I miss her so much.

Mo Ran couldn't say any of this. He could only suppress the ache in his chest and blink back the tears in his eyes. He could only endure Chu Wanning's indifference and disregard. He chased after him, laughing with a feigned nonchalance that fooled everyone.

No one could know of his past; no one could share in his pain.

All he could do was smile brilliantly beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower. A smile too passionate, too hungry, hiding an inexhaustible longing in its corners; a smile that would end up scalding Chu Wanning at a touch.

Mo Ran opened his eyes.

He was no longer on Sisheng Peak. Instead he found himself in a tiny cell, gray and dim. The only light came through a narrow hatch for food near the bottom of a black iron door. The ceiling over his head was engraved with a set of scales.

A prison. This was the world's most hallowed temple of justice, the foremost court of law, which stood apart from the ten great sects —Tianyin Pavilion.

He lay in his cell, throat burning, lips dry and cracked. His surroundings were so quiet he could hear the desolate whisper of the wind, and beneath it, the uneasy chatter of his subconscious. It was a long time before he managed to gather his awareness.

In truth, he'd always been a little surprised such a day had never come in the past life. But fate had been generous to him, allowing him to drift along for two lifetimes; it was only now that it finally sought him out to answer for his crimes.

"Mo Ran, time to eat."

Time's passage was murky here; he didn't know how long he'd lain awake before he heard footsteps and saw a tray of food pushed through the hatch—fried youxuan pancake and a bowl of soup. Mo Ran didn't get up. The Tianyin Pavilion attendant said nothing more; their crisp footfalls quickly faded into the distance.

How was Chu Wanning doing now? And what of Sisheng Peak? What happened to those ruined chess pieces after the battle?

Dazed and weary, he returned again and again to the same three questions. It was a long while before he accepted that no one would give him answers. He was a prisoner now.

He sat up. His chest throbbed dully, and his entire body felt weak. The spiritual energy that had surged through him for as long as he could remember had vanished entirely. Leaning against the wall, he stared off into space. So *this* was how it felt to break one's spiritual core. To be unable to summon a spiritual weapon, powerless to use any techniques. Like a surf-riding kun without its great tail, or a cloud-dwelling peng stripped of its wings.

Mo Ran curled up in a corner, his dark eyes blank and unseeing.

He suddenly felt awful, but not because of his own predicament—he'd remembered Chu Wanning in the past lifetime. As fate would have it, in this lifetime he'd finally come to understand Chu Wanning's helplessness and pain in those years. He wished he could apologize to that version of Chu Wanning. But it was too late—he could never go back.

The pancake and soup in his cell went from hot to lukewarm to cold. Eventually, he ate. The entire time, he was left in isolation.

He was a child locked up in a dog cage again. Though this room was much nicer than that cage had been—here he could at least comfortably stretch his limbs. He lay in the darkness, drifting between sleep and wakefulness—though there was little difference. Within these walls, it was like he was already dead.

Muzzily Mo Ran wondered: What if he had in fact died? What if this entire lifetime was no more than a beautiful dream, a brief reverie after he lay down in the coffin beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower, in the moments before his souls scattered? Perhaps all thirty-two years of his life had flashed before his eyes, a circus of color and emotion, before everything withered to bones in a grave.

The corners of his lips quirked up, and a smile ghosted over his face. If only that were the truth. How wonderful it would be.

He was so tired. He'd been pressing forward and struggling for so long. He didn't care if it was hell or the mortal realm that lay before him. He just wanted to rest. His heart had been reduced to a shambles, turning aged and decrepit since Chu Wanning's death in the past life. He'd spent all these years trying to do good, trying to make up for it. He'd searched for the medicine that could reverse this decay, but he'd never found it.

He'd fought and begged for so very long, ceaselessly and shamelessly. But he was tired of fighting, tired of begging. Over his lifetime he'd lost his mother and his shizun, his friends and his lover, his stolen family and his false renown. Now he'd lost his spiritual core as well. But he'd been brought to Tianyin Pavilion nonetheless. Broken as he was, he couldn't escape the cultivation realm's harshest punishment.

He'd finally lost all hope. He knew he wouldn't be forgiven.

He, Mo Weiyu, was an ugly, lopsided mountain. His wounds had been blanketed in pure-white snow, but now the snow had melted, and he had nowhere left to hide. Everything—his darkness, his monstrousness—had been laid bare.

He could never be Mo-zongshi. Since the moment his hands

were stained with the blood of innocents, he was doomed only ever to be Emperor Taxian-jun. He was a vicious killer, a terrifying beast. He deserved to die. The world would rejoice at his demise.

When the cell door opened at last, he didn't know how many days he'd spent inside. Two Tianyin Pavilion disciples strode into the room. Without a word, they bound him with immortal-binding ropes, then yanked him upright and dragged him through the door.

They marched him down a long, pitch-dark hallway. "How are they doing?" Mo Ran rasped with difficulty. They were the first words he'd spoken in days.

Neither of his escorts answered him.

At the end of the hallway, daylight burst in. Mo Ran flinched under that dazzling light like a dragon that had cowered too long in the dark, eyes blinded and talons rotten. He couldn't bear its brilliance. He wanted to cover his eyes, but his hands were bound. All he could do was lower his head, tears welling under his dark lashes.

His eyes and ears were muddled; he didn't know where he was. Only his sense of smell remained sharp. He could smell the wind, the crowd, the flowers and trees on the breeze.

Someone pushed him from behind. Hesitant, he stumbled forward.

Gradually, his ears adjusted to the clamor. He could hear the din of many people talking, their conversations rushing over him like a tide. The waves could wash away mud, yes, but they could also drown a man.

Mo Ran felt like he couldn't catch his breath. He was weak, so terribly weak.

"Kneel."

His handler shoved him down. He knelt. The bright sun shone down from on high, casting its light over his haggard face. He hadn't expected it to be such a beautiful day.

"So *this* is Mo-zongshi…"

"Never thought we'd see him interrogated at Tianyin Pavilion. Ah, you really can't judge a man based on appearances."

Mo Ran's ears buzzed. He could make out some hazy shapes in his field of view, but nothing was clear. He peered out at the scene before him through half-lidded eyes, shaded by his lashes.

It was the same interrogation platform he remembered from

when he'd come with Xue Zhengyong and Xue Meng to watch a trial, many years ago. But now he was no longer a spectator, but the criminal on display.

The people beneath the platform bunched and jostled like a pond full of carp. They were commoners and wandering cultivators who'd come to Tianyin Pavilion to watch the proceedings. Mo Ran couldn't make out their faces or read their expressions. In his blurred vision, those heads whispering back and forth became an undulating field of wheat.

He looked up. High walls loomed on all sides, with viewing platforms perched atop. Visitors from all the great sects sat upon them: He spotted the green of Bitan Manor, the red of Huohuang Pavilion, the yellow of Wubei Temple…

His heart clenched. How strange that he could still feel pain.

And there, an expanse of silver and blue—the largest and calmest contingent in the stands, Sisheng Peak.

He blinked. Ignoring his stinging eyes, he focused his gaze on them with all the concentration he could muster. But still he couldn't see—he couldn't see where Xue Zhengyong was, couldn't pick out Xue Meng or the Tanlang Elder or the Xuanji Elder. Couldn't find Madam Wang. On the interrogation platform, at the end of it all, he still couldn't see the people who mattered to him most.

"Mo Ran of Sisheng Peak, illegitimate son of Nangong Yan, lord of Rufeng Sect's ninth city…" Aided by a voice-amplifying technique, Mu Yanli's crisp words floated above the din. "We must conduct a stringent investigation, delivering neither penalty nor pardon in error…"

Mo Ran couldn't parse any of it. Her sharp, clear voice was too piercing for someone who'd languished in seclusion as long as he had.

Mu Yanli spoke steadily. Scattered phrases drifted into Mo Ran's ears, things like "a murderer must pay with his life," "harboring sinister motives," and "cultivating forbidden techniques." Finally he heard her say, "It is the duty of Tianyin Pavilion to purge criminals from our society and uphold the principles of justice."

A Tianyin Pavilion disciple walked up to Mo Ran, a black silhouette against the blazing sun. "Open your mouth."

When Mo Ran didn't react, the disciple clicked his tongue. He wrenched open Mo Ran's jaw and poured a jug of bitter, salty medicine down his throat. Mo Ran choked and broke into violent coughing. It had been days since he'd eaten, and the caustic mixture burned like fire all the way down. He felt his stomach spasming, as if

he was about to vomit. The disciple grabbed him around the neck, forcing him to remain still and swallow the rest. The ice-cold medicine felt like a snake slithering into his belly, poised to rend him open from within.

Mo Ran's face was ashen. He wanted badly to throw up, but he wasn't willing to voice any weakness or plead for mercy; he didn't even allow his tears to fall. He'd lived half his days in poverty, enduring too many miseries to name, but that didn't mean he lacked self-respect.

Once he swallowed the last drop, the disciple released him. He wheezed for air. His weariness was plain; his wings drooped, but he still had all the viciousness of a lone falcon on the verge of death.

The Tianyin Pavilion disciple turned to the assembly with an explanation: "The Draught of Confession."

Mo Ran's lips were gray, but as he looked down, he couldn't help but chuckle. The Draught of Confession… Heh, of course he knew about the Draught of Confession. Only criminals tried by Tianyin Pavilion were forced to take this tonic; it never touched the lips of an innocent. Those who drank it would feel their awareness fade, after which they would confess all the wrongs they'd committed in life.

The Tianyin disciple approached Mo Ran and tapped him on the lips, casting a voice-amplifying spell so everyone could hear him. Mo Ran closed his eyes, knitting his brows. He tried to resist it—but the pain sent tremors through his body, making his chains clank dully. His face was bloodless, and his eyes slowly rolled up into their sockets. He fell prostrate onto the platform, twitching and convulsing.

He was conscious, but his mind was clear one moment, clouded the next. He fought the medicine with every fiber of his being, but it was impossible.

"I've…killed people," he choked out at last, closing his eyes in agony.

His pathetically ragged voice resounded through every corner of the square. The crowd went quiet, all eyes fixed upon the man on the platform.

Mu Yanli shot him a look of utmost disdain. "How many have you killed?"

"Too many… I can't remember…"

Below the platform, some of the commoners began to pale.

"How old were you when you first killed?"

"Fifteen."

“Was it a cultivator or a commoner?”

“A commoner.”

“Did you kill for vengeance or self-defense?”

“Both.”

The two of them traded questions and answers. Many of those watching had only come for the spectacle with no knowledge of the prisoner’s circumstances. Hearing that Mo Ran had murdered for revenge at fifteen, then killed so many people he couldn’t remember the number, they were shocked and furious.

“Who’d’ve thought the famed Mo-zongshi was a monster who kills without batting an eye!”

“Terrifying… He’s a real menace!”

“I was too scared to kill a chicken when I was fifteen, but he was already murdering people? What a brute…”

Mu Yanli commanded coldly, ignoring the clamor, “Continue recounting your crimes.”

“I…” Every muscle in Mo Ran’s body was taut with strain, but he found himself powerless to resist. He said hoarsely, “I…assumed someone else’s identity. I pretended to be the nephew of Sisheng Peak’s leader…”

“For how long?”

“Eight years…”

“Continue.”

Mo Ran said slowly, “I…cultivated…the three forbidden techniques… Zhenlong… Zhenlong Chess…Formation…”

At this, worry passed over the faces of many of the cultivators sitting on the platforms above.

Someone glowered in Sisheng Peak’s direction and said scathingly, “Didn’t Xue Zhengyong want to pardon this beast? I knew the Draught of Confession would bring out the truth. To think Xue Zhengyong tried to stop Tianyin Pavilion from questioning Mo Ran—the old fool’s been so thoroughly hoodwinked he doesn’t even want justice for his nephew’s death! Now we all know Sisheng Peak has a disciple who’s been learning forbidden techniques—surely the sect should be disbanded? What’s the point of letting them continue? So they can nurture more evil?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along—I knew he was the criminal type! When he shattered his core to save us at Sisheng Peak, it was just a ploy to win our trust! Thank goodness we didn’t let him

go!”

“That’s right—he was trying to save his own skin. With his abilities, so what if his core’s ruined? He probably knows some deviant method to heal himself. We didn’t even know how much danger we were in. If it wasn’t for the persistence of Tianyin Pavilion’s master, we might have let this degenerate walk free!”

A massive set of scales sat atop the interrogation platform, haloed in shimmering gold—a one-of-a-kind holy implement. The scales weighed over a ton and had stood on the platform for thousands of years, since Tianyin Pavilion’s founding days. It was said this device had been left behind by the gods—that it would consider all the mortal realm’s sins and punishments, and render the soundest judgment.

Before Mo Ran had begun to speak, Mu Yanli had commanded one of her disciples to produce a weight made of golden spiritual energy and place it on the scales. The moment it landed in the pan, that delicate golden weight swiftly expanded. As one side of the scales sank low, the other floated upward, its position corresponding to a specific punishment.

When Mo Ran spoke of his first crime, the scales hovered at *Carve out the spiritual core*. But when he mentioned the Zhenlong Chess Formation, they shot to the highest position: *Sunder the souls*.

Up in the stands, the blood drained from Xue Meng’s face. “Sunder the souls…?” he mumbled.

That would mean that there would never again be another Mo Weiyu, another Mo Ran, neither in heaven nor on earth. Xue Meng would never again see that brother of his—whether real or false—no matter how many times the Wheel of Reincarnation rotated. His mind was blank, his hands frozen.

Xue Zhengyong rose solemnly and addressed Mu Yanli. “Since Tianyin Pavilion was founded, no one has ever received the punishment of having their souls sundered. Pavilion Master Mu, I wonder if you’ve lost sight of justice.”

Chapter 271:
Final Interrogation

AT THIS, someone from another sect leapt up in anger. “Could Sisheng Peak please shut up?! Your disciple’s been learning the Zhenlong Chess Formation—he’s violated the most basic precepts of the cultivation realm. Your sorry excuse for a sect should be dissolved and left to rot! Now’s not the time to bicker, but can’t you at least show a little self-awareness?”

“Xue Zhengyong! You’re still speaking up for him? Could it be that you were in on it too?”

Angry chatter buzzed all around.

Such was the fate of families and sects alike—if any one of their number proved to be godly, all were elevated along with them. But as soon as one person committed some reprehensible act, the entire group was viewed as a breeding ground for evil.

“These scales weigh his sins. This alone does not decide his sentence.” Mu Yanli’s tone was matter-of-fact; she made no accusations against Sisheng Peak. “Xue-zhangmen, no need to fret. After weighing his sins, we will also consider his merits. Only after these are factored in will the final verdict be rendered.”

She turned her gaze upon Mo Ran again. “Continue your confession,” she said coldly.

“I’ve…trespassed against…my teacher…”

“Trespassed against your teacher?”

These words were baffling to others, but Mo Ran felt as though his heart was on fire. These were crimes from his past life—the Draught of Confession could force even the sins of the past life from his throat!

But he didn’t want to say it… He didn’t want to! Would he be made to describe, in front of all these people, how he’d humiliated Chu Wanning a lifetime ago? How he’d held him prisoner; how he’d married him and made him his consort? How he’d broken that lofty and proud man, and finally driven him to his death?

He didn’t want to say it. Mo Ran was certain his own end was imminent, but Chu Wanning still had many years ahead of him. As a spirit of the sacred tree, he was possessed of fathomless talent and the purest spiritual energy. Mo Ran hoped Chu Wanning could live on peacefully after this. When the time came, surely he’d ascend to

immortality. Never again would he endure the pain of reincarnation, or the suffering of love.

His shizun was so good, so pure. Mo Ran wanted to protect him. He couldn't let anyone know they were involved, that there was anything between them. No one could be allowed to form the impression that Chu Wanning was dirty, that he'd been stained with Taxian-jun's blood and filth.

He had to protect him. He had to.

That flame was blazing in his chest, an awful, consuming pain. He could vaguely hear Mu Yanli's frigid voice asking the question: "What do you mean you trespassed against your teacher?"

He wouldn't answer. He refused to say.

His fingertips had been scraped raw against the sandstone platform, and his forehead was scarlet with blood. He hunched over on the ground, panting like a fish dying upon the riverbank.

He wouldn't say a word.

Resisting the Draught of Confession was not unlike resisting Tianwen. As long as he gritted his teeth with all his might, he could endure it. Under Tianyin Pavilion's ruthless questioning, beneath the staring crowd, he squirmed and howled like a trapped beast.

The torment was unimaginable. Most people wouldn't stand a chance against Tianwen, and this pain was a thousand times worse. He felt like a pair of invisible hands was wringing out his entrails, like his innards were being torn to shreds. Like he was covered in open wounds doused with salt water. It was an agony that burned like fire, boring into his bones.

Mu Yanli's voice was distant, as though it came to him across a vast ocean. "You say you trespassed against your teacher—what do you mean by this? Speak!"

But Mo Ran refused. He bit through his tongue and his lips; his mouth filled with blood, but his tears did not fall. As he had during those seven days he'd spent locked in the dog cage, he wouldn't cry. His tears would only be one more thing for the audience to laugh at. No one would pity him, and neither did he yearn for their pity. Even if the pain gutted him, even if it killed him, he would endure it.

Mu Yanli peered down at him. "Tell me—what did you do to Chu Wanning?" she demanded.

The pain compounded until his vision shimmered with hallucinations. He saw Chu Wanning becoming an immortal, a hundred years in the future. He was as handsome and dignified as

ever in robes white as snow. There was a sharpness to Chu Wanning when he wasn't smiling, but when he did, all those sharp edges melted into boundless warmth.

"I didn't…"

Mu Yanli stared. Her red lips parted. "What?"

"I misspoke…" Every syllable was a croak forced through his throat. "I didn't… I never trespassed…" He looked up, eyes bloodshot yet bright as he bit out the final words: "Against my teacher!"

Mu Yanli was silent a moment, her expression difficult to read. She looked somewhat astonished, even at a loss, but her features were so forbidding that any emotion quickly iced over. "Continue," she said at last.

Mo Ran coughed up blood. He felt like his lungs had been crushed; every breath reeked of iron. He sprawled on the ground, gasping, waiting for the truth potion's agony to subside. He was drenched in sweat, hair plastered to his forehead, one deathly pale cheek pressed to the stone.

As if unable to stop herself, Mu Yanli took half a step forward. "Continue your confession," she said, glaring.

Mo Ran closed his eyes. "I have no more…crimes to confess," he said hoarsely.

At a gesture from Mu Yanli, a disciple came forward and collected some of Mo Ran's blood, then smeared it onto another weight. This one was carved in relief with two seal-script characters: *Merits* and *Virtues*. It was used to determine the achievements of the accused.

Mu Yanli tossed the weight onto the scales. The balance slowly shifted. Everyone but Mo Ran stared intently at the golden needle.

Sunder the souls… Still *Sunder the souls*…

Slowly, the needle tilted.

Sunder the souls.

Whatever good Mo Ran had done, it hadn't been enough to shift the needle away from *Sunder the souls*.

Xue Meng clutched his knees, the scimitar Longcheng laid over his lap. He stared at the scales, his expression dreadful. Trembling, he strained to keep his back as straight as possible—if he was to crumple now, it would be too hard to recover. His shaking palms were colder than Longcheng's dark blade.

Mu Yanli's lovely eyes were trained, unblinking, on the golden

scales. The needle's drift was slowing. It quivered around *Sunder the souls*, as though about to halt. She swept back her sleeves. "Behold," she intoned, "the final decision has…"

"It's still moving."

"Xue-gongzi…"

Xue Meng glared down at her. He'd spoken up, even though his voice was painfully unsteady, even though he didn't know if he was right or wrong to do so. "The needle's still moving."

"It's about to stop," Mu Yanli said.

"Then wait for it to stop."

Mu Yanli met Xue Meng's gaze. After a moment, her lips lifted in a cold, mocking smile. "Fine. Let's wait for it to stop."

The sun blazed down, its heat cloaking the ground in a haze of dust.

Everyone held their breath, staring at that needle, waiting for it to halt. But strangely, even now, the needle continued to vacillate. As though unsure of how to judge Mo Weiyu, it wobbled, then hesitantly veered toward more lenient punishments, inch by painstaking inch.

This development seemed to have caught Mu Yanli off guard. She stood silently, her goldenrod-yellow robes brushing the ground as she waited for the divine scales to reach their decision.

Xue Meng's knuckles were white as he stared at the needle, as if it was arbitrating not merely the life of Mo Weiyu, but all the years he and Mo Ran had known one another. Their relationship had transformed from indifference to resentment, to acceptance, to understanding. Was it Xue Meng's initial aloofness that had been wrong? Or was it the *Ge* he'd uttered later that was unacceptable?

He didn't know. He stared at the needle, his heart shuddering; only when he saw how it moved did he allow himself to hope.

Don't stop. Please. Keep going, just a little more—see, it's almost there…

Regardless of Mo Ran's past transgressions, he'd shattered his spiritual core. No power remained to him. How could they still inflict the harshest possible punishment? How could they obliterate his souls…

One inch. Then another. Then finally—

"*Carve out the spiritual core*," Mu Yanli announced expressionlessly. Her aura was perfectly impassive. Despite her billowing robes of warm gold, every inch of her emanated a frosty

chill.

The needle had stopped. Its tip pointed tremulously at *Carve out the spiritual core*—its final judgment of Mo-zongshi.

Mu Yanli turned to face the masses below and the members of the ten great sects in the stands above.

They were indeed the full ten, for Tianyin Pavilion had left untouched the old seats belonging to Rufeng Sect. Now only one person sat there alone: Ye Wangxi, clad in black from head-to-toe. Nangong Si's embroidered cloth quiver was slung over her shoulder, and Naobaijin, who'd lost his master forever, lay across her lap. Her complexion was wan, but her eyes were clear and sharp as she gazed down at the interrogation platform.

"The heavens are all-knowing and impartial," said Mu Yanli. "Tianyin Pavilion has considered merits and errors alike, free from self-interest, bias, or animosity. We sentence Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu, to have his spiritual core carved out. We will allow three days to notify the public. If there are no objections, after three days…"

Xue Meng had been sitting in silence, eyes closed, but at this, he found himself unable to hold his tongue. He leapt to his feet in a flash of silver armor. "I have an objection."

Silence followed.

"I don't need to wait three days," Xue Meng said. "I have an objection right now."

Commotion broke out below. "Sisheng Peak needs to close its fucking gates! What does he mean he has an objection?!"

"Might as well try Xue Zhengyong and Xue Meng next and be done with it! They're probably all working together. Why else would he vouch for this monster?"

"When the Zhenlong chess pieces attacked, why did they leave Sisheng Peak's people mostly unharmed? How could anyone believe they're innocent?"

Xue Meng's face was white with fury, but he had no choice but to rein in his anger.

Although Mu Yanli had heard the other cultivators' cries, she appeared to ignore them. "If young Xue-gongzi wishes to speak, I will listen," she said coolly.

Xue Meng's mouth opened, but he couldn't find the words. Overcome with worry, Madam Wang gently tugged at his sleeve. "Meng-er, we have three days. Let's put our heads together and think about what we should say…"

But Xue Meng acted like he hadn't heard his mother. He stared at Mu Yanli, then at the scales. Finally, he shifted his gaze to that tiny, distant speck of black on the platform—Mo Ran. His eyes seemed to waver, like a curtain rippling in the breeze. They didn't darken, but neither did they brighten. He blurted out, "He doesn't have a spiritual core."

"What do you mean by this?" asked Mu Yanli.

Xue Meng looked at her with new urgency. "What do I mean? Don't you see? *He*'s the one who saved you at Sisheng Peak, who forced those chess pieces to retreat! Pavilion Master Mu, how do you plan to carry out this sentence? His core has been shattered! What are you going to do—carve out his heart?" His eyes were stinging, his nails digging into his palms. "*Carve out the spiritual core*… He doesn't have a spiritual core! So does that mean you'll take his life?"

Mu Yanli narrowed her eyes. "Naturally, Tianyin Pavilion has its ways."

A new voice sounded from the platforms. "According to law, the punishment will be carried out three days after the sentencing."

The crowd looked around for the speaker—it was Ye Wangxi. "Pavilion Master, please describe how you plan to proceed."

A Bitan Manor disciple shouted, "Now *you're* demanding answers? Who do you think you are?"

More people began to whisper beneath the stands. "She really thinks she's something. What, just because Jiang Xi supports her? Because Nangong Si cleared Rufeng Sect's name with his death? This no-name bitch dares to question the master of Tianyin Pavilion—what gives her the right?"

Ye Wangxi gave these responses no acknowledgment. Someone who held a grudge against the Nangong clan yelled, "Ye Wangxi, Rufeng Sect is dead! Do you think you're the Rufeng Sect leader just because you're sitting over there by yourself?"

Naobaijin, his spiritual energy still unrecovered, whimpered as Ye Wangxi held his small form to her chest. Her solitary figure stood calmly until those mocking, angry shouts gradually quieted. "The commander of Rufeng Sect's shadow city is still here," said Ye Wangxi. "None of you have the right to decide whether or not it has died."

"You—"

Ye Wangxi didn't wish to waste her breath on these people. She turned her gaze to Mu Yanli. "Pavilion Master, please explain."

"There are ways to restore a spiritual core," said Mu Yanli. "Yes,

his core has been shattered, but the fragments remain in his chest. The core doesn't need to be whole for it to be carved out."

Xue Meng was white as paper. "Then what do you plan to do?"

"We will use a spell to excise all the fragments of his core," Mu Yanli answered. "Tianyin Pavilion will not take his li—"

Before Mu Yanli could finish the word *life*, Xue Zhengyong was on his feet. He cut her off, his face like rolling thunder. "You'll carve out every fragment of his core?"

"Correct."

"How many times will you have to open him up for this?" The streaks of white at Xue Zhengyong's temples made the fury in his panther-like gaze all the more stark. "Five times? Ten? Carving out the spiritual core damages the heart. It's unimaginably painful when done even once. There was a prisoner several years ago who had her core carved out by Tianyin Pavilion—she died as soon as she returned to her cell that day."

"That only means her body was too weak to withstand it," Mu Yanli replied, unmoved. "It is not the fault of Tianyin Pavilion."

"Then you might as well take his life outright!" Xue Zhengyong bellowed. "Mu Yanli, his core is broken! You've made yourself clear—if his core is in two pieces, you'll cut him open twice, if it's in three pieces, three times… But what if it's in a hundred pieces, a thousand pieces? Do you intend to give him death by a thousand cuts? It'll be torture!"

"If it is indeed so broken, then such is his fate."

Xue Zhengyong fell silent. *Fate?* But wasn't everything fate?

He suddenly felt the grand absurdity of it all. What was fate, after all? Because of fate, he'd mistakenly raised this boy as his own nephew. He'd given him a family and a teacher, a place to live and a home to call his own.

But what was this child's fate as written? He was an abandoned bastard son who had never had enough to eat. He and his mother had eked out a living begging and panhandling. After his mother died, that frail wisp of a child had dragged his mother's festering corpse to a mass grave. With his own hands, he'd buried the only warmth he'd ever known. He'd been beaten and abused, locked in a cage, and imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit.

Everyone wished to believe the ways of the world were just, but in truth, fate was unfair from the moment of birth. Why was it that rich young masters lived in ostentatious wealth, their gold winning

the smiles of many a beautiful woman, while destitute commoners languished just a few streets away, subsisting on ants, with no roof above their heads save for the sky? Why was it that some people were doted on by their mothers and wanted for nothing, while others had to bring their mother's body before the gates of a great sect, only to hear the words *beggars can't be choosers*? Why was it that some people were born in the dirt, while others were born into glory?

It wasn't fair.

When fate dumped its unfairness onto the most vulnerable, when a single price adjustment could steal away the people most dear to them—where, then, was justice? They too were living people. How could their hearts be free of resentment? How could they not hold a grudge?

Although this child had committed many wrongs, although he wasn't Xue Zhengyong's nephew by blood, although fate had played a cruel trick on them… When he thought of all Mo Ran had endured, his heart ached.

Xue Zhengyong closed his eyes. "This is far too inhumane," he muttered. "Perhaps the divine scales didn't consider the fact that his core's been shattered… Hundreds of times, Mu Yanli." He looked up, his voice shaking. "You'll be taking the awl and driving it into his heart hundreds of times."

It was a beautiful day. The entirety of Tianyin Pavilion was solemn and upright, everything in perfect order. Xue Zhengyong lifted his face to look at the clouds drifting past overhead. "All right, then. After this, he will have paid for his crimes. He will have given back everything he owes the world."

The wind picked up.

"But as for what the world owes him…" Xue Zhengyong's voice caught. "Will there be anyone to give it back—will there be anyone to give it back to him?"

Chapter 272:
Poison Tongues

THE TRIAL was adjourned. Though there were objections voiced, the outcome could not be changed. Tianyin Pavilion's Divine Scales of Justice had decided the fates of the cultivation realm's criminals for thousands of years. No one could escape this custom, least of all Mo Ran.

When everyone had left, Mo Ran—bound by spells, shrouded in barriers, and encircled by guards—was brought to the Platform of Repentance outside the pavilion grounds. He was to kneel here for three days and three nights, subject to the taunts and jeers of passersby, until the day his core was carved out. This served as public notice of his sentencing.

In Tianyin Pavilion's guesthouse, Xue Meng couldn't sit still. At last, he jumped to his feet. "Mom, Dad. I want to go see him."

Madam Wang grabbed his arm. "No." She was rarely decisive, but now, her manner brooked no resistance. "You can't go to the Platform of Repentance. You can't see him."

"Why not?! I… I just…"

His mother shook her head. "Sisheng Peak is in a difficult position. How many called for the sect to be disbanded today? You and your father both need to stay calm and keep your heads down. If Sisheng Peak is condemned too, there will be no way out of this mess for anyone—Yuheng and Ran-er included."

"But will people really yell at him and curse him?" Xue Meng asked, dazed. "I don't know what happened with the Zhenlong Chess Formation; I don't know why he could stop those pawns… But…" Xue Meng buried his face in his hands, his voice thick with tears. "But he really was the one who saved us that day… Those people weren't there; they didn't see what happened. Why are they treating him like this when they've only heard one side of the story?"

Why? Xue Meng was too naïve to understand, but Madam Wang and Xue Zhengyong both knew. Tianyin Pavilion was the seat of justice in the cultivation realm; its very name meant *sound of heaven*. If something had always been done a certain way, especially by an institution that had stood for thousands of years, very few would question if it was just, or whether it might be wrong. In the face of such power, any voice of dissent that spoke up would be easily drowned out.

Mo Weiyu was a criminal. Anyone could humiliate and abuse him because the target of their blows and insults was a man the world deemed a villain. When they spat on him and punched him, it wasn't violence, or blowing off steam, or following the crowd, or lashing out in jealousy. It wasn't even the satisfaction of hitting a bully when he was down. What they were doing was condemning evil and upholding justice.

The masses delighted in his plight. Anyone who dared beg for mercy on his behalf was surely a co-conspirator. They too deserved to be dragged onto the interrogation platform, to have their faces smeared with paint, their hair hacked off. A bunch of degenerates without a moral compass—they would deserve it.

Xue Meng could not go to the Platform of Repentance. Chaos would ensue if he did.

It began drizzling that evening. The Platform of Repentance was unsheltered, so Mo Ran knelt in the mist, rivulets running down his face. He closed his eyes, but the rain wasn't enough to douse the enthusiasm of the thronging crowd.

Many of the cultivators had left by this time; the crowd was mostly composed of ignorant commoners. These citizens of the upper cultivation realm knew nothing of cultivation, nor were they aware of the other strange and startling events that had recently transpired. What they did not lack was curiosity. Holding oilpaper umbrellas, they gazed at the man bound to the platform. The stands had been too far away to get a good look at Mo Ran earlier that day, but now that he was being displayed on the Platform of Repentance, these commoners could walk up and see the condemned for themselves.

"This morning when I heard about all the things he did, I thought he'd be a terrifying brute. But he's actually pretty good-looking," a girl murmured in surprise.

The strapping young man beside her attentively adjusted her cloak. "You're too naïve. Plenty of good-looking people hide malice in their hearts. Don't let appearances deceive you."

A man and woman with a young child had made the trip specifically for this viewing. The father, a refined-looking schoolteacher from the upper cultivation realm, lifted his son so he could see Mo Ran kneeling on the ground. "See? Make sure to behave yourself when you grow up. Don't end up like this monster."

The child, no older than six, was perplexed by the scene before him. "Daddy, what did he do wrong? Why does he have to kneel

here?"

"He's committed too many crimes to name," the teacher said tartly. "Tianyin Pavilion says he committed murder and arson, cultivated forbidden techniques, and faked his identity. This person has no shame or decency. He's a cold-blooded killer, worse than a beast. When you grow up, you must be the opposite of him—got it?"

"Got it."

The father let out a breath of relief, only for the child to pipe up with, "But Daddy, do you know him?"

"Me?" The man blinked. "Of course I don't know him. Your daddy's the most upright scholar at Qingfeng Academy in the upper cultivation realm. I conduct myself with integrity and deal only with righteous gentlemen. How could I know someone engaged in such dark dealings?" He paused; then, as if to drive the point home, explained earnestly to his son, "Ours is a family of scholars. We raise our sons with the most upstanding values. If we spoke to someone like *him*, we'd immediately find them filthy and repugnant. Got that?"

This time, the child didn't answer directly. "But Daddy, if you don't know him, how do you know he… He…um…" With effort, he parroted his father's words. "That he's a cold-blooded killer and worse than a beast? Today's the first time we've ever seen him. Doesn't it take a long time to get to know someone? Like me and Xiaohua next door…"

"You don't understand—this is different," replied the teacher. "He's already been found guilty."

The child stared wide-eyed at Mo Ran. "But this gege looks really pitiful… He doesn't look like a bad person. Could that pavilion thingy be wrong?"

The teacher had an inflexible temperament and shot down his son's questions without a second thought. "You're only asking this because you're young. You'll understand when you're older. Tianyin Pavilion has been the bastion of righteousness on earth for thousands of years. It is the temple the gods themselves left behind—they never make mistakes."

The child put his fingers in his mouth and watched Mo Ran. Though he didn't seem to fully understand, neither did he speak in his defense again.

Night descended, and the crowd slowly thinned. By midnight, the drizzle had become a downpour. No one remained.

At daybreak, a peddler trudged by with his wares, headed for

the morning market. The rain was coming down in sheets, and the wind was fierce. His stooped figure pushed his ramshackle wooden cart through the storm.

Mo Ran was half-awake, his consciousness scattered. When he hazily heard the cart's wheels clattering against the bluestone road and the peddler's ragged breathing, he thought he was still on his travels during those five years he'd spent away from Sisheng Peak. He squinted through hooded, unfocused eyes. Like a reflex honed during those days and nights he'd lost Chu Wanning, he felt an instinctive urge to lend a hand. He wanted to help this weary peddler push his cart over to the shelter of a tree, do whatever he could to ease his way. But he found he couldn't stand up.

It was a slow moment before he remembered that those days of atonement were gone. In the present moment, Tianyin Pavilion had already convicted him.

The wind gusted, blowing the tarp off of the peddler's cart. The man lunged to grab it, but it was too late. The instant the tarp flapped loose, all the wares in his cart were drenched. The exhausted man had no choice but to frantically chase after the tarp in the rain.

Mo Ran watched in silence. He felt terrible for the peddler. He remembered his own mother dancing among knives for a copper coin. Always there were so many forced to brave the bitter winds and frigid rain to earn their keep, while others sheltered in comfort.

He really wanted to help. In the quiet rain, he felt surprisingly calm. Memories drifted past. He remembered the cheerful proclamation he'd once made to his mother: *Once I make something of myself, I'll build lots and lots of houses. That way everyone can have a place to live. No one will have to go hungry or cold anymore.*

But why did none of the Tianyin Pavilion disciples standing nearby step forward to help? It would take so little effort. Yet they only stood at attention, straight as a row of pines, representing Tianyin Pavilion in all its solemn dignity. They moved not a muscle, as though their bodies were made of stone, and their hearts much the same.

The peddler scurried after the tarp as it flapped and tumbled in the wind. At last it came to a stop on the Platform of Repentance, right in front of Mo Ran. A scrawny hand, leathery as old tree bark, grasped a corner of the tarp. Mo Ran let out a sympathetic sigh of relief.

But everything in the man's cart had already been ruined. The peddler's mood was foul, and he had no ready outlet for his

frustration. He was gripping the tarp, chest aching with sorrow, when he sensed Mo Ran's eyes on him.

Whipping around, the peddler glared, then spat. A glob of phlegm landed squarely on Mo Ran's face. "What are you looking at?! You sorry excuse for a human—even *you* think you can laugh at me, huh? You deserve what you got! You should be dead!"

The peddler wasn't satisfied, yet he didn't dare step closer. He picked a few rocks off the ground and hurled them at Mo Ran.

Tianyin Pavilion's disciples were accustomed to scenes like this. They'd often giggle among themselves and remark, "Of course anyone with a moral compass hates criminals. What's the problem if they land a few blows?" They had a great deal of empathy for the feelings of the commoners and rarely stood in their way.

The rocks didn't hurt much when they struck Mo Ran's face and body, but he shivered under the blows. As he saw Mo Ran's trembling and his pained expression, the peddler's own bad luck seemed to pale in comparison. Somewhat appeased, he gingerly picked his way back toward his cart and covered it once more with the tarp. His frail figure disappeared into the distance.

The world was a blur of mist. The rain rinsed away the peddler's spittle, just as it did countless other stains. It fell heavier and heavier, leaving the mortal realm spotless.

At dawn the next day, the cultivators who had gathered at Tianyin Pavilion for the trial continued to leave through the city gates, passing Mo Ran where he knelt. Some ignored him, while others made a point to express their contempt.

A pair of black boots appeared in front of Mo Ran. Then an umbrella opened, shielding him from the drizzle.

Mo Ran was asleep. He didn't notice anything had changed until he heard a voice call out—calm and refined, yet staunchly resolute: "Open a barrier over him to block the rain."

"Without the pavilion master's express permission, we cannot make any changes to the Platform of Repentance."

"It's just a barrier."

"I'm sorry, but we can't."

Mo Ran opened bleary eyes. He saw a tall man—no, not a man. Ye Wangxi. "There's still time before the punishment is carried out," said Ye Wangxi firmly. "You shouldn't treat him like this."

“Shouldn’t treat him like what?” One of the disciples frowned. “Miss Ye, please mind your words. Tianyin Pavilion has acted according to law. It’s the heavens that disapprove of him and sent this rain. *We* haven’t inflicted any additional punishment on him.”

Ye Wangxi’s eyes flashed with anger. “How have you not? You’ve made him kneel in the rain all night long—from dusk till dawn! If I didn’t see this today…”

A group from Bitan Manor walked by—Zhen Congming with a gaggle of shidi. Overhearing the commotion, Zhen Congming glanced over and sneered. “Aiyo, look there. The commander of Rufeng’s shadow city is meddling in other people’s business again.”

“She’s holding an umbrella for the criminal, heh.”

More passersby began to gather, whispering among themselves. Several female cultivators rolled their eyes at Ye Wangxi, muttering in loud whispers: “I heard the man in black who defended Ye Wangxi at Rufeng Sect was none other than Mo Ran.”

“What? I had no idea… This brute was the one who helped her?”

“Mo Ran even killed the woman who raised him. Why did he treat Ye Wangxi so well?”

There was a dramatic pause as one of them covered her mouth with a handkerchief, eyes wide with shock. “Oh my—you don’t think the two of them are…”

No one was foolish enough to say it aloud, but disgust and excitement flitted across every face as they thought of the wild possibilities. The thrill was like a powerful, unrelenting torrent, washing over the crowd and spreading through the misting rain. They stared at the two figures on the platform—a man and a woman. Why would a woman willingly help a man who’d fallen into misfortune? Because she’d slept with him? She’d *definitely* slept with him. She must be hopelessly in love with him, drowning in infatuation as they tangled passionately in bed.

How filthy.

Mo Ran glanced up at Ye Wangxi. The first time he tried to speak, nothing came out. He swallowed, then tried again. “Miss Ye…”

“You’re awake?” Ye Wangxi lowered her head, mild and courteous as ever.

“You should go… Don’t stand here and let them drag you into this too.”

But Ye Wangxi didn’t move from her spot. Leaning down, she

produced a bottle of warm water and uncapped it, balancing the umbrella in one hand. The canopy canted slightly, sending raindrops rolling down onto her shoulder. “Drink some.”

“Miss Ye,” a Tianyin Pavilion disciple called out. “Feeding prisoners is not allowed.”

“But throwing stones at them is?”

Although Ye Wangxi hadn’t witnessed the events of last night, the ground around Mo Ran was littered with rocks of all sizes, and his cheeks and forehead were covered in muddy scrapes. As she glared at the disciples, her gaze held some of Nangong Si’s fierceness—his beloved shadow still lingered upon her. “Isn’t Tianyin Pavilion supposed to do things the right way? Is this what you call justice?”

Unable to defend themselves, the disciples fell silent. Their leader cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. “Water is fine, but no food.”

Ye Wangxi helped Mo Ran drink some warm water. “Why…” Mo Ran mumbled.

“You helped A-Si,” Ye Wangxi said without looking up. “You helped me too.”

“On Mount Jiao, if I’d died instead, then Nangong…”

Ye Wangxi’s hand stilled. A shudder ran through her, yet she replied, “Anyone would want to live. I would never blame you for wanting to live.”

Mo Ran couldn’t respond.

“Drink,” she urged. “Xue Meng can’t come—his parents won’t allow it. I’ll hold the umbrella for you. You once helped A-Si and me though the whole world stood against us. Now I will help you even if no one else stands with you.” Her expression was reserved but determined. “I’m here.”

Ye Wangxi kept her word and remained by Mo Ran’s side. Tianyin Pavilion wouldn’t allow a barrier, so she held the umbrella aloft, tilting it slightly to block the rain for Mo Ran.

With her keeping watch, no one dared throw stones at Mo Ran, but the onlookers’ insults grew increasingly nasty.

Genderless freak. Beast in human clothing.

Slut with no standards. Craven murderer.

Those eager to make accusations could always find some fault. Everyone knew this kneeling man would never be pardoned, and that the woman who stood by him had lost her sect. They had no one else

to rely on. No matter what kind of abuse was hurled at them, who would speak up on their behalf?

Mo Ran only now discovered how many courageous warriors there were in the world. They seemed to sprout everywhere, like bamboo shoots after the rain. Every one of them was so upstanding, so indignant, so fearless in calling out evil. One wondered where all these heroes had been in the past.

Tianyin Pavilion's trials were rare events. It would likely be another decade before anyone received such an honor. Curious spectators came and went in waves, like the rise and fall of the tide.

"This Mo Ran once did quite a few good deeds," someone remarked. "Do you think he had ulterior motives all along? He even stayed in our village once—a violent murderer, living among us! How terrifying to think back on it now."

"I heard his mother was Duan Yihan—did you know about that?"

"Duan Yihan? That celebrated goddess of music?" the speaker asked in astonishment. "But I thought she was a good person. I heard she was talented and gentle, a woman of class with a kind heart…"

"What do men know?" someone else interjected darkly. "Wasn't Duan Yihan a whore? Times certainly have changed if even whores can be said to have class. No one has any sense of propriety anymore."

Peeved, the man who'd been told off shot back, "Duan Yihan was a songstress, not a prostitute. She made her living in entertainment houses for years, but she never took any clients—"

"You only think she never took clients because you're poor! A woman like that only cares about money and status—she has no honor to defend."

A new voice chimed in, indignant. "What's the difference between a songstress and a prostitute anyway? None of them have any dignity. People these days are so quick to speak up for a prostitute—the upper cultivation realm has really gone to the dogs."

The final speaker was none other than the schoolteacher who'd brought his son the day before. Today he was carrying a stack of books instead of his child, and a group of students trailed behind him. The teacher raised his chin, secure in his righteousness.

Someone in the crowd recognized him and called out a courteous greeting. "Ma-xiansheng, your class has let out early today."

"You can only learn so much from books," said the teacher. "I ended class early so my students could receive some practical

instruction in the ways of the world." He shot a sidelong glance at the young master who'd come to Duan Yihan's defense and snorted. "Though I hadn't expected to hear such vulgar drivel here. Young man, you've truly broadened my horizons. I despair for the future of our beloved upper cultivation realm."

"That's right! It's just as Ma-xiansheng says. A paragon of virtue."

"A worthy teacher, and a true scholar."

Duan Yihan's defender flushed with embarrassment and anger, but he was surrounded by taunts. He could do nothing but shake out his sleeves and leave.

At first, Mo Ran was incensed by such exchanges. But eventually all he felt was powerlessness. He couldn't stop these people from tarnishing his late mother's name with such foul accusations.

Before she died, his mother had always urged him to repay kindness instead of seeking revenge. Now he had no choice but to allow her memory to be shredded in these onlookers' vicious mouths as they called her a whore, a slut, a bitch who'd brought evil into this world. He couldn't stop them from speaking.

Ye Wangxi held her tongue for a time, but soon even she couldn't stand it any longer. She stepped forward, ready to argue with the jeering crowd below. "Don't bother," Mo Ran called out softly, stopping her in her tracks. "There's no point."

She came back to his side. The rain had stopped, but she still held the umbrella as though its flimsy paper could afford him some protection. Mo Ran looked up at her. After a pause, he insisted hoarsely, "Don't stay here with me any longer, Miss Ye. If you still trust me…return to Tianyin Pavilion and find Xue Meng and the others from Sisheng Peak. Tell them…"

He fell silent. He could barely summon the strength to speak. "Tell them they have to come up with a way…to track down Hua Binan as soon as possible. They have to find my shizun."

His heart seized when he mentioned Chu Wanning. Where was he? From what Shi Mei had said, he didn't intend to harm him—but then where did he take him? What would he force him to do?

Mo Ran couldn't bear to think about it.

"The first forbidden technique has already been unleashed. You have to be ready." Mo Ran's lashes trembled. "I won't be able to stop a second attack…but a second attack will definitely come. Please believe me… I have no hidden agenda. I just want to stop this."

We can't let this go on. I don't want history to repeat itself. I don't want to see Chu Wanning summon Huaisha a second time. I don't want him to sacrifice himself to mend this broken world—not again.

Chapter 273:
Divergent Paths

IN THE HALL on Mount Jiao, a single candle burned. Nangong Liu was curled up beside the seat on the dais, snoring away. A few half-eaten tangerines lay by his hand.

A slender figure appeared in the corner of the hall, his shadow passing over Nangong Liu as he walked toward the dais. His steps were slow and deliberate, and he tapped the ground before him with a cane. Above the delicate bridge of his nose, a strip of snow-white silk concealed his eyes completely.

"Mngh…" The rap of the cane against the stones woke Nangong Liu, who rubbed his eyes in befuddlement. "Ah, it's dear friend-gege… What happened to your eyes?"

The newcomer was the blinded Shi Mei, rarely seen since his injury.

"Didn't you go to Tianyin Pavilion?" Nangong Liu asked, still sleepy.

Shi Mei shook his head. "It's a long story. I'll spare you the details." He paused. "A-Liu, I believe I left a battle scroll for the Zhenlong Chess Formation on the table. Can you find it for me?"

"Of course." Nangong Liu immediately began rummaging through the items on the table and quickly drew out a silk scroll. "Here you go."

"Thank you very much."

Shi Mei's slender fingers moved slowly over the silk's surface. He could no longer see what was written, but as a safeguard, such scrolls were also designed to be read using spiritual energy. He stood in the silent hall, slowly poring over the scroll's contents.

This scroll contained Hua Binan's plans for the pawns he'd deployed to attack Sisheng Peak and force Mo Ran to shatter his own core. Among them were forty-six thousand inhabitants of Rainbell Isle in the past lifetime, thirteen thousand commoners from Wubei Temple, so on and so forth—and every single one of Sisheng Peak's disciples from that other world.

Shi Mei gripped the smooth fabric, feeling strangely numb. One thought flickered through his mind: When his other self spoke of *necessary sacrifices*, had he been referring to carnage on such a vast scale? All of Sisheng Peak's disciples, with the sole exception of Xue

Meng, had been made into Zhenlong chess pieces to do Emperor Taxian-jun's bidding.

Hua Binan had once gently explained it to him thus: "You must know that I, too, have grown accustomed to witnessing death. The mortal realm is full of suffering—of course I wish we didn't have to commit evil. I hope the path we've chosen will bring about as few deaths as possible. It would eat at my conscience otherwise."

These were the words Hua Binan had said to him shortly after he first came into this world through a rift in space and time.

The mortal realm is full of suffering. I wish we didn't have to commit evil, but sometimes we have no other option. I only hope for the least bloodshed.

Such words were consonant with Shi Mei's own worldview. He was ruthless and unforgiving, but not necessarily because he wished to be; rather, he'd never been given a choice.

It would eat at my conscience… Hua Binan had said this to him in all earnestness, when in truth he'd already slaughtered so many in his own world. It wasn't until now that Shi Mei understood the magnitude of this lie.

"Dear friend-gege, are—are you okay?" Through the buzzing in his ears, Shi Mei vaguely heard Nangong Liu. "You look very pale… Why are you shaking? Are…are you getting sick? Are you cold?"

As Nangong Liu babbled, Shi Mei abruptly felt himself engulfed in warmth. Nangong Liu had taken off his outer robe and hastily draped it over Shi Mei's shoulders. "Here—I'm not cold. You can have my robe."

This once-sly schemer had become so innocent after losing his mind. Perhaps everyone possessed genuine sympathy for others as a child. But the passage of time wore deep furrows into their hearts to match those on their faces, until they no longer resembled themselves.

Shi Mei drew Nangong Liu's robe around himself. He did feel cold, to the very marrow of his bones. His head spun, and tears of blood seeped from beneath the white fabric. Shi Mei crumpled onto the seat, curling into a ball. "He's not me…" Shi Mei muttered. "He's not me…"

Nangong Liu was perplexed. "What?"

Shi Mei hid his face in the crook of his arm. The tremors that had started at his fingertips spread to his entire body. He refused to touch the silk scroll again, letting it roll off the chair. "I wanted to save people. I knew we'd have to make sacrifices along the way; I

knew we'd make hard choices, that we'd betray those who treated us with sincerity. I've already accepted that there's no turning back from what I've done. When we discussed the possibility of losing my eyes, I never hesitated. But I…"

"Dear friend-gege…" Nangong Liu placed a tentative hand on Shi Mei's head, offering him a child's clumsy comfort.

Shi Mei's voice broke on a sob. "But I never knew he killed so many people."

The silk scroll had fallen to the ground. Written upon it were the fates of thousands of cultivators and commoners from that other universe—all reduced to bones.

Time dripped by. Nangong Liu crouched next to Shi Mei, at a loss for what to do. Eventually, Shi Mei braced a hand against the table and slowly pushed himself to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Nangong Liu exclaimed.

Shi Mei stood in silence, seeming to hesitate. Only after Nangong Liu repeated his question for a third time did he snap back to reality. He bit his lip, then answered, "The secret chamber."

He couldn't continue blundering along this path. He needed to rescue his shizun.

Having made his decision, Shi Mei quickly arrived at the chamber's door. He placed a hand on the stone only to discover that Hua Binan had left an unbelievably complex ward. Shi Mei stilled in surprise, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a rueful smile.

From the battle scroll to this ward on the door—it seemed he'd been taken for a fool. No one else could be the target of such a spell. It was a type of ward Shi Mei would have no obvious reason to know. Hua Binan didn't trust him.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Shi Mei said softly. A pale blue light flared in his palm and flew toward the center of the array. "Perhaps you hadn't yet learned this technique at my age. But I have—you simply didn't know it."

The door to the chamber sprang open with a thunderous crash.

Given the chance to live one's life once more from the beginning, would anyone take the exact same path? Even if they were the same person, perhaps with a single small change—if they'd sought shelter from a rainstorm in the spring, for example, or enjoyed a nap beneath a tree in the summer—everything might unfold differently.

Shi Mei hovered on the threshold for a long time. At last, he stepped lightly into the room.

An everbright lantern spangled with dragon motifs flooded the space with radiance. Unfortunately the light was of no use to either of the room's occupants. One was unconscious, and the other was blind.

Shi Mei sat down by Chu Wanning's bedside and reached out, his slender fingers brushing over Chu Wanning's face. "Shizun…" he murmured.

Chu Wanning did not stir. His cheek was still feverish. His fractured souls were melding together, and in the process, he was receiving bits and pieces of Mo Ran's memories, submerging him in tormented dreams.

A glow appeared at Shi Mei's fingertip. He tapped Chu Wanning's brow, sending a stream of spiritual energy, soft as water, into his body. "Are you feeling any better?"

There was no answer.

Shi Mei lowered his face. He'd known Chu Wanning couldn't be woken, or he wouldn't have had the courage to come into this chamber and sit beside this bed. He sat unmoving, as though thinking many thoughts. Or perhaps he was thinking nothing at all.

For as long as Shi Mei could remember—since before he became Chu Wanning's disciple—he'd held one dearest wish in his heart. For the sake of realizing this wish, no sacrifice would be too great. He knew that to do so would be his destiny, so he'd never thought he'd done anything wrong—until the day a rift opened in time, and his other self wearily stepped out.

Shi Mei saw himself, nearly two decades older.

Forget shock or fear—when he first saw Hua Binan, the youthful Shi Mei had felt, more than anything, a certain queasiness. He had no idea what his other self had endured to become what he was—callous, cunning, volatile, and utterly monomaniacal. Nevertheless, for the sake of their shared goals, he agreed to everything Hua Binan asked of him. He had arrived at where he stood today one step at a time.

Over the years, the two Shi Meis had each played their own parts. The younger Shi Mei remained always at Mo Ran's side, while the mastermind behind the scenes was Shi Mingjing from another lifetime.

Just as Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi were different people, he and the other Shi Mingjing weren't necessarily the same. On account of their differing experiences, the other Shi Mingjing was more truly the calculating Hanlin the Sage. In contrast, as time wore on, the younger Shi Mei had become merely another shadowy piece on the sage's chessboard.

Shi Mei had once been a merciless, cutthroat youth before Hua Binan had appeared through the Space-Time Gate. But once he and Hua Binan started working together, Hua Binan had repeatedly admonished him to hide his claws and learn to dissemble. When he was younger, Shi Mei once had a huge argument with Hua Binan about this.

"I've had enough," he'd snapped. "How much longer do you want me to put on this act? I'm sick and tired of swallowing my pride and playing nice. Who could keep track of all the lies I've told for your schemes?"

He, Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and Chu Wanning had just returned from Jincheng Lake. Hua Binan hadn't been satisfied with his performance before the Heart-Pluck Willow and had made his displeasure known. He hadn't expected such a vehement reaction from Shi Mei. Hua Binan had paused, taken aback. "I'm just reminding you to be careful. You mustn't reveal anything."

"Easy for you to say." Shi Mei bit his lip. "Have I ever refused you when you told me to check Mo Ran's feelings? Do you know how repulsive it feels to flirt with someone you don't like at all?"

Hua Binan seemed momentarily at a loss for words. At last, he said, "I've experienced everything you have. How can you think I wouldn't know?"

"But *I* haven't experienced everything you have!"

Met with Hua Binan's silence, Shi Mei pressed on. "Ever since you came to this world, you've lectured me about what's wrong and what's right. Fine—you've seen more than I have. For the sake of our work, I'll listen to you, and I'll give it my all. But, Hua Binan—" Shi Mei's voice was rough with emotion, the rims of his eyes reddening. "You're in no position to criticize me."

It was the first major disagreement Hua Binan had had with his younger self since he'd arrived in this world. His face turned ashen, and he pressed his lips together without a word.

"You failed in your world, so you used the rift Chu Wanning opened to come here," said Shi Mei. "You want to start over. But I'm not your pawn." When Hua Binan said nothing, Shi Mei added, "I'm working with you because we share the same goal."

Hua Binan closed his eyes. "You're being ridiculous. I don't think of you as my pawn."

Shi Mei was still agitated. "Is that so? Ever since you realized Mo Ran was reborn, haven't I done everything according to your instructions? I'm the one who's been keeping an eye on the dormant

Flower of Eightfold Sorrows inside him! It's been me all along!"

Hua Binan was silent.

"When he first showed up in Wuchang Town, you rushed me over to pretend to run into him. Then you had me constantly bringing him little snacks, trying to ascertain his feelings. And let's not forget all the ways you told me to drive a wedge between him and Chu Wanning." Shi Mei's unblinking peach-blossom eyes were fixed on Hua Binan's face, which was growing uglier by the minute. "This whole game of pretend makes me sick to my stomach!"

"If I weren't here, you'd be doing these things anyway," Hua Binan said through gritted teeth. "Don't act like I'm forcing your hand. In the past life, I did all the things you're doing right now. Mo Ran is the host of the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. Only by monitoring his emotions can we track the development of the flower inside him. Did you believe that your grievances were unique?"

Seeing that Shi Mei didn't deny it, Hua Binan continued, "In the past life, I behaved just as you are. I kept on pretending until the Heavenly Rift opened, and I used my death to incite his hatred. Only then did I begin my new life as Hua Binan."

Shi Mei was quiet.

"I had to grin and bear it for so long, yet you're at your limit after just a few months?"

Shi Mei's head shot up. "Do you really not get it? You were fighting for yourself. But what about me?"

Hua Binan hesitated. "There's no difference."

"There is. I'd rather not be told what to do." Shi Mei glared at him for a beat before adding in clipped tones, "Not even by myself from another world."

But it was nigh impossible to do only as his heart desired. After that argument, Shi Mei still had to bow his head to fate, no matter how reluctantly. He was young and inexperienced, but he had no illusions about what it was he ultimately sought. In the end, he continued to compromise with his other self.

All these years he'd dutifully obeyed every order his counterpart gave him, behaving more like a puppet than any Zhenlong chess piece. It would be a lie to say he wasn't fed up with it. But whenever his frustration became too much to bear, he had always told himself, *These hardships are nothing in the grand scheme of things.*

"When can we end this farce? When will the rift happen?" He pestered Hua Binan constantly with such questions.

And Hua Binan's answer had always come like a carrot dangled in front of a donkey: "Soon. Sooner than in the past life."

Thus Shi Mei waited, day after day, infinitely patient.

Finally, the rift to the ghost realm had opened. He had fully expected to fake his death and gain his freedom, just as he'd done in the past life. It had never occurred to him that Chu Wanning might die in that battle instead.

That night, he and Hua Binan clashed like never before. Behind the sealed door of his room in the disciples' quarters, Shi Mei smashed all the porcelain cups and bowls before him, chest heaving violently.

"Tell me, how am I supposed to stay calm and keep on pretending? Shizun is dead. Was *this* part of your grand plan?"

Hua Binan's expression was likewise deeply ugly. "How can you blame me for this? If anything, you should blame Mo Ran—he's the one who acted without thinking." His hands clenched into fists on the table, nails sinking into his palms. "*He* killed Chu Wanning," he snarled, suddenly vicious.

"That's right, it was him." The rims of Shi Mei's eyes were scarlet, but he refused to let his tears fall. Since he was little, his mother had always told him that he must never cry, under any circumstances. Hua Binan was no different. "He's the one who killed Shizun, so don't try and stop me—I'm going to find him and kill him tonight!" Shi Mei said.

Hua Binan's head jerked up. "Are you insane?!"

"Oh?" Breathing harshly, Shi Mei shot Hua Binan a spiteful glare. "You're familiar with the concept of insanity?"

"We must protect Mo Ran at all costs. We must temper him and control him," Hua Binan said through gritted teeth. "This is the crux of everything we do. Put everything else out of your mind."

"See, this is how it always is." Shi Mei laughed derisively, bringing a hand to his forehead. His eyes flashed. "You're Hanlin the Sage—you can make your offerings to Chu-zongshi with the rest of Guyueye; you can disparage Mo Ran as you please. But what about me? Do you *hear* what you're asking me to do?"

Shi Mei threw himself down into a chair, his eyes filled with undisguised scorn. "The first thing out of your mouth when we met today was an instruction for me to check if the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows in Mo Ran had been completely ruined, or if it could still be salvaged." He looked up slowly, gaze fixing upon Hua Binan's ashen face. "You wanted me to confess to Mo Ran. Under *these*

circumstances?" Shi Mei scoffed softly. "You said I had to prevent Chu Wanning from taking my place in his heart."

His words were sharp as needles, stabbing into both Hua Binan and himself. He let out a humorless laugh. "Between the two of us, who's the insane one?"

Hua Binan shut his eyes, his pupils shifting uneasily under delicate lids. "There was nothing I could do. Because of the sacrifices Chu Wanning made in the past life, Mo Ran's flower is fragile. If it's destroyed completely, it'll be impossible to control Mo Ran when the time comes."

"So you're forcing me to do all your despicable dirty work, is that right?" Shi Mei had run out of patience. He slapped the table and jumped back to his feet. "Shizun is *dead*… Have you even considered my feelings?"

Hua Binan didn't answer.

"You love him—so shouldn't you know I love him too?" Shi Mei's voice was shaking.

The room was quiet.

At last he sat back down. Shi Mei pressed a palm to his forehead, long lashes trembling beneath his hand. Neither of them spoke for a long while. Outside the window, rain came down in torrents. Lightning and thunder seemed to cleave the world apart, like the primordial chaos breaking open across the sky.

Finally, Hua Binan said softly, "A-Nan, I truly am sorry."

But Shi Mei's response was flat. "Don't call me A-Nan."

Silence.

"You and I are not the same. Call me Shi Mei, or Shi Mingjing."

Chapter 274:
Critical Moment

PERHAPS NO ONE was immune to change. Even two individuals who started out as indistinguishable versions of the same person would encounter the vicissitudes of fate again and again. After a decade or two, their personalities and circumstances would no longer perfectly align.

When Shi Mei had first planted the flower in Mo Ran, he had a heart cold as steel, his will unbending. In his eyes, there was room for nothing but his own revenge and ambition.

But when he saw how his other self acted, he suddenly yearned to know if Hua Binan had ever harbored a shadow of doubt in his heart—if he'd ever found himself ridiculous for even a moment.

Ultimately, he'd still followed all of Hua Binan's orders. He'd already sacrificed so much; it was pointless to give up with their goal half achieved. Getting sentimental now could ruin everything he'd worked for. Nothing was more important than protecting himself, and ensuring that Mo Ran was under his control.

He'd kept up this act for such a long time, after all—he'd worn this mask for so many years. The disgust had seeped down to his bones and turned him numb. No matter how wrong it felt, even Chu Wanning's death wouldn't change a thing.

It wasn't until he stood by Naihe Bridge, with Master Huaizui's soul-calling lantern in his hands, that he felt a stab of irrepressible envy. He had nowhere to go; he could no longer forge ahead, without hesitation, for the sake of the person he loved. How wonderful would it be if he, like Xue Meng and Mo Ran, could take charge of his own fate—or at least believe that he could.

But he was never the master of his own destiny. He was like an unwilling opera singer pushed onto the stage, resigned to putting on a show only he could bring to life.

To begin with, he needed to seduce Mo Ran. Mo Ran, who had smiled at him and said, "Shi Mei, I really like you so much."

Then he needed to exploit Xu Shuanglin. Xu Shuanglin, who had languidly tossed a tangerine into the air and cast him a sidelong glance. "I've spent my whole life drifting—I never thought I'd make a friend like you. Thanks for teaching me the Rebirth technique. Once that fool Luo Fenghua comes back to life, I'll have him make a bowl of tangyuan for you. Bet you didn't know he makes the best tangyuan.

It's only 'cause I respect you that I'll let you have a taste."

And finally, he needed to spring the many traps he'd hidden.

Just as in the worst-case scenario he and Hua Binan had discussed, he would use his own injury to manipulate the emotions of his shizun and fellow disciples. Then, in that critical moment, the Space-Time Gate would open.

He was supposed to be the chess master. But after his older self arrived in his world, he had become one of his own pawns. He didn't enjoy being ordered about; at times, he found it almost too loathsome to bear. But his obsession with his goal was too strong, and his desire for it ran too deep. He didn't want to give up so easily.

But he really, truly hadn't known that when his other self spoke of "trifling sacrifices," he'd meant the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, the annihilation of an entire world. Only after he opened the Space-Time Gate had he witnessed this cruel truth.

In the end, this Shi Mingjing and the other Shi Mingjing were not the same. He hadn't lived those additional decades; he hadn't experienced that inch-by-inch descent into depravity. At this point, he could no longer understand his older self.

But it was impossible to turn back now. He amounted to little more than a sacrificial pawn, no different from any of the other black and white pieces strewn across the board. He had lost his edge; he would never again have an advantage to press.

"Shizun." The hazy lanternlight fell upon his beautiful face, as calm and gentle as ever. "There's something I've been thinking about for a long time. Even Mo Ran could become a different person when he got a second chance. I wonder—if I could do it all over again—would an errant thought crossing my mind have led to a lifetime of different choices?"

His voice was the only sound in the stillness of the room.

"No matter—it's too late," said Shi Mei. "You already hate me to the bone, and Mo Ran's no different. The young master will never see me as a friend again… No matter how many times I wavered along the way, I turned out just like him."

He placed his hand on Chu Wanning's burning cheek, passing healing spiritual energy to him. "I'm sorry, Shizun. I let you down," he said. "The only good thing is that I'm already blind—I'll never have to see the hatred in your eyes."

Shi Mei paused, then smiled a smile that filled the room with the bright warmth of spring. "The last thing I ever saw was everyone's

concern for me. That's enough."

He untied the immortal-binding ropes around Chu Wanning's wrists and dispelled the barrier on the bed. Finally, he nullified the ward on the stone door. When he'd finished, Shi Mei turned. Slowly, by feel alone, he made his way out of the room. He strode into the hallway, and the darkness swallowed him up.

In Shandong, in the shadow of Tianyin Pavilion, the pedantic Teacher Ma had just returned home from school. Kneading at his sore shoulders, he headed toward the kitchen for a cup of eight treasures tea.

He pushed open the door to find a pitch-black room.

Teacher Ma frowned. Groping toward the light stand, he yelled, "Dear? It's the middle of the night—why didn't you light a candle? You're…"

Flint sparked. With a sound like a sigh, a candle flared to life.

Teacher Ma fell silent, frozen in the middle of the room. His household servants had become hanging corpses, their strangled forms swaying from the rafters like wind chimes. His wife had been disemboweled, her innards a gory trail on the ground. Her eyes and mouth were open wide, and her face was turned toward the door.

"Ah…" Teacher Ma attempted to cry out, but only a strangled whimper escaped his throat. He had wet himself in terror by the time he at last managed a full-throated scream: "*Ahhhhh!*"

"Tsk. What are you yelling for?" A man walked out of the inner room holding a rolled-up copy of the *Book of Documents*. He raised the scroll to the nape of his neck, scratching an itch, and yawned. "Never seen a dead body before?"

"You… Y-y-*you*! Mo—Mo…"

The man snapped his fingers, then drawled in explanation: "Silencing spell."

"Wh-what?"

"A silencing spell—ever heard of it?" The man rolled his eyes. "This venerable one was just reading the classics you have here while I waited. This venerable one knows it's not polite to disturb the neighbors at night. So go on—yell all you want. If anyone hears you, you may direct your complaints to this venerable one."

Teacher Ma was pale as a ghost, knees knocking together in fright. He spent his days blathering on about arcane texts to his

students; of course he'd never witnessed such a bloodbath. Drenched in sweat and urine, he stammered after a long silence, "Mo… You m-monster… Aren't…aren't you supposed to be at the punishment grounds in Tianyin Pavilion… You—you…"

"The punishment grounds in Tianyin Pavilion?" The man raised his eyes, so black they flashed purple, and laughed. "Ah yes, this venerable one did pay a visit to the punishment grounds. How else could I have overheard your considered opinion the other day?"

He tossed the scroll aside and straightened to his full height, approaching the teacher with unhurried steps. The candle illuminated his peerlessly handsome features—who else could it be but Taxian-jun?

The former emperor flashed a brilliant grin, dimples creasing. Unexpectedly, he bowed to the schoolteacher. "This venerable one has always admired scholars above all. How rude of me to barge in here and murder your whole family. Sir, please accept my kind regards."

Taxian-jun's bizarre manner of speaking, juxtaposed with the corpses strewn in every corner, was too much for anyone to handle, let alone the spineless Teacher Ma. The terrified man sank to the ground with a dull thud, panting harshly. "What do you want… What do you want?!"

Taxian-jun chuckled and raised a hand. A long blade materialized in his grip. He tilted his face to look at the teacher. "Take a guess."

"Don't kill me!" Teacher Ma shrieked, writhing backward on the ground. "I don't want to die, please!"

As Teacher Ma scrambled away from Taxian-jun, he collided with something behind him. Turning his head, he found himself staring into the wide, unseeing eyes of his wife. "Noooo!" he howled piteously. "No—please, don't… Spare me… *Aaaaah!*"

The blade had plunged unerringly into his thigh, piercing straight through and sinking into the ground beneath.

The man screamed.

Taxian-jun's eyes curved sweetly as he smiled. "If I may ask, sir…what do you think is the difference between a songstress and a prostitute?"

"Wh-what?" Teacher Ma blinked, uncomprehending. Through agonized sobs, he croaked, "What…"

"You said it yourself," Taxian-jun said patiently. "Sir, back at Tianyin Pavilion, you said"—here, he mimicked the schoolteacher's

singsong, fussy way of speaking—"'Neither songstresses nor prostitutes have any dignity. I can't believe people these days will actually speak up for a prostitute. The upper cultivation realm is really going to the dogs.'" He scoffed and turned his handsome face to the teacher. "Did I memorize it well, sir?"

Beneath the terror and pain, Teacher Ma vaguely recalled that he'd insulted Mo Ran's mother with these words. "No no no—I was confused!" he blubbered. "I meant…" He swallowed, sweat running down his face. "A songstress is a songstress, and a prostitute is a prostitute… Th-they're not the same, they're not…"

"How are they not the same? This venerable one thought what you said was very reasonable." Smile plastered on his face, Taxian-jun stepped toward him and raised his blade once more. "To be honest, this venerable one doesn't have the keenest mind—I've always wished for someone to guide me. That clever tongue of yours would make a fine gift for this venerable one, hm?"

"No… No no no! Zongshi, have mercy! Good cultivator, please have mercy!" Teacher Ma babbled, sweat running down his back. "Please, be the bigger man, take the high road…"

"Who're you calling *zongshi*, *good cultivator*?" Taxian-jun asked, his smile never wavering. "Do you live under a rock? Call me Your Majesty."

"Your…Your Majesty?" Teacher Ma blinked in confusion, but didn't argue—as long as he survived this, he'd call this man *Daddy* if asked. He immediately began chanting: "Your Majesty! Your Majesty, please spare me! Your Majesty, please have mercy!"

Taxian-jun dropped to one knee and grasped the schoolteacher's chin. "Huh. A question for you, Mister Paragon of Virtue. Is it this venerable one who lacks dignity, or is it you?"

"Me, me me me! It's me! Me… It's…"

But what use was it to plead for his life? Taxian-jun's grin didn't falter amidst the teacher's sobbing. With a firm squeeze of his hand, he crushed the teacher's windpipe. The black-robed man looked around the room with a self-satisfied air, confirming that he'd left no survivors. Then he stood, wiped the blood from his hands, and walked into the courtyard.

Hua Binan waited for him outside. "Are you happy now?"

"Happy enough."

"Then can we return to Tianyin Pavilion and make our preparations?"

Taxian-jun eyed him. “Sure, I guess.”

Hua Binan shook his head. “You really are impossible. The man only said a few words about your mother, yet you couldn’t let such a little thing slide. You just had to—”

“And how would you feel if this venerable one said a few words about *your* mother?”

Hua Binan’s face darkened ever so slightly. He turned aside without answering.

“Let’s go,” said Taxian-jun. “Didn’t you say once you get Mo-zongshi’s heart tomorrow, you’ll put it into this venerable one’s body? What are you waiting for? This venerable one is running out of patience.”

With a flare of his robes, Taxian-jun strode off toward Tianyin Pavilion.

The sky was bathed in gold, clouds edged in hues of rose. Dawn came swiftly.

A horrified shriek shattered the quiet morning as an early-rising neighbor discovered the bodies of Teacher Ma’s entire household. On any other day, such grisly slaughter in Tianyin Pavilion’s own territory would have stirred up a great commotion. Yet unfortunately for the victims, their deaths went almost unnoticed—a far more attention-grabbing event was occurring at that moment.

On the sentencing platform, the torches burned bright. Two of Tianyin Pavilion’s servant girls lit rows of lamps on either side of the platform, the light catching on the shimmering gold thread of their robes. As they lifted their fair and lovely arms to each candle, the wax melted, and the clean scent of pine wafted into the air.

Strangely, all of Tianyin Pavilion’s guards were very comely, men and women alike. Whether it was because of their cultivation techniques, or because Mu Yanli was picky about her disciples’ looks, no one could say.

“Heaven and earth both possess their own wisdom; good and evil each repaid in due time.”

The bronze, beast-shaped lanterns flared to life in turn, their dancing flames like billowing red silks. The surroundings teemed with people, both on and below the platform. Xue Meng sat with the Sisheng Peak contingent in the crowded stands, trembling faintly.

Over the past three days, Xue Zhengyong had pleaded his case to countless people, to no avail. The other cultivators trusted blindly in

the fairness of the Divine Scales of Justice and feared Mo Weiyu, a man who had mastered the Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Those from Sisheng Peak tirelessly tried to explain to anyone who might listen: “He saved us. He shattered his own spiritual core to save us that day. If he was plotting against us, why would he have sacrificed so much?”

But there was simply too much that was suspicious about Mo Ran. None of the other sects were willing to stand with Sisheng Peak. Even Guyueye and Taxue Palace kept silent.

A practitioner of the first forbidden technique, suddenly recovered after being lost for millennia, against the most righteous arbiter of justice, which had presided over the realm for just as long—only an idiot would place their trust in the former. Xue Zhengyong’s harried entreaties seemed foolish, and Sisheng Peak’s explanations sounded feeble.

At some point, a hazy thought crossed Xue Meng’s mind: *Maybe we should steal him away.* But he knew it was impossible. Tianyin Pavilion’s guards were everywhere, to say nothing of the leaders and disciples of the other sects and the sea of commoners below the stands. They could never manage an escape under the scrutiny of so many eyes.

In the end, Mo Ran’s spiritual core was still to be carved out.

“Tianyin Pavilion has given three days’ public notice. The punishment has been decided.” Mu Yanli, solemn and graceful, surveyed the vast crowd below. She struck a bronze ritual bell in her hand. “Bring out the criminal, Mo Ran.”

Mo Ran had been escorted from the Platform of Repentance to the sentencing platform. His spiritual core was broken, but several dozen of Tianyin Pavilion’s most skilled disciples were watching his every move. These disciples were vultures awaiting Mo Ran’s impending death: Very few survived having their spiritual cores carved out. Scenting blood on the air, the vultures’ eyes flashed keenly.

“Mo Ran, who has committed serious crimes, will be stripped of his spiritual core in punishment at noon today,” said Mu Yanli, voice crisp and cool. “He is convicted of ten crimes, which I will announce before these witnesses.”

Although the rain had stopped, the ground was still wet. Mo Ran stood in a puddle, bright sky and opaque clouds floating past his feet. He cast his gaze upward until he found Ye Wangxi among the crowd. His ink-dark eyes fixed upon her like a question—had she passed on

his warning to the members of Sisheng Peak? Had she understood those final wishes he couldn't abandon?

Ye Wangxi nodded once. The corners of Mo Ran's mouth lifted, his eyes lighting up as a radiant smile unfolded across his face.

What a lovely day. The rain had passed.

"The first crime: slaughtering commoners with no regard for human life." Mu Yanli's voice floated through Tianyin Pavilion, dignified and composed. "The second: committing arson for personal vengeance."

Incense smoke ribboned up before the Buddha, a plea to the god among the clouds—sitting cross-legged, his hands cupped in his lap as he surveyed the endless masses, whether in anger or benevolence. For years, Mo Ran hadn't liked looking up at the sky. If there were indeed deities up above in the heavens, he feared they would discover the sins hidden in his eyes, the malice buried in his heart. But today he allowed himself to relax at last. He raised his eyes to the horizon, and the sunlight flooded in, washing out the purple-blackness of his irises until they glimmered a pure, limpid brown.

He watched the sky, that halcyon expanse; even the clouds were pale and light. Mu Yanli's voice was distant. He closed his eyes. He did not look again at Sisheng Peak, nor at any of those faces dear to him.

"The sixth: cultivating forbidden techniques in secret, in violation of the law."

A thought occurred to him, and his brow furrowed with mixed regret and tenderness. He'd wanted to treat Chu Wanning well in this lifetime, but he hadn't succeeded. Even their first time making love, for which he had waited so earnestly, had been absurd in its violence. His quest had ended in failure.

He wasn't a good person at all. He was a scourge, a blight, a pathetic joke.

Over two lifetimes he'd wanted to protect his mother, but he hadn't been able to. He'd wanted to repay the kindness he'd received, but he never managed to follow through. As a child, he'd wanted to be a hero. Later, he'd merely hoped to masquerade as the nephew of Sect Leader Xue for the rest of his life. And when he reached the end of that road, he'd forsaken his heart entirely and become the ruthless and cold-blooded Emperor Taxian-jun.

He'd accomplished nothing in the end.

"Taxian-jun, Mo Weiyu, Mo-zongshi…" Lashes quivering, throat

bobbing, he sighed out words only he could hear, self-mocking and rueful. “You are truly the most laughable man on earth.”

He tilted his head back to look skyward once more. The wind ruffled his bangs. He squinted, wondering, *Where is Chu Wanning now?*

Perhaps the blessings he’d received were already too bountiful—the two of them had exhausted all the time fate allotted them. It would be asking too much to see Chu Wanning one last time in the twilight hours of this life.

But this was for the best. His eyes curved into crescents, and he chuckled on the sentencing platform. At least Chu Wanning wouldn’t see him in such a wretched state.

“The time is nigh! Prepare to carry out the punishment!”

A somber shout rose from the guards in answer, and a bugle sounded.

As though that final bugle call reached his ears from thousands of miles away, like the long shadow of a nightmare, Chu Wanning’s eyes snapped open within the secret chamber on Mount Jiao. Startled awake, he sat bolt upright.

“Mo Ran!”

In the wavering candlelight, he drew great, gasping breaths, his thick robes soaked with sweat. He was trembling. Without thinking, the first words he had blurted were the name of the man with whom he’d entangled for two lifetimes. He swallowed thickly, his dazed eyes roving over the room.

Just now, he seemed to have seen a phantom blade. Goosebumps rose on his skin, and his heart pounded like a drum. For some reason, he was gripped by horror. He sat on the bed and scrubbed vigorously at his face; by the time he came to his senses, his sweat had cooled.

Memories clear as day flashed before his eyes, memories that didn’t belong to him. The half of his earth soul that had been housed in Mo Ran’s body had brought many of Mo Ran’s memories back with it when it returned to Chu Wanning—memories the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows had devoured and erased. Mo Ran himself could no longer recall these pivotal events.

But Chu Wanning had seen them all.

Chapter 275:
A Loyal Heart Shatters

He saw Mo Ran as a child, smiling brightly up at his mother. He saw Duan Yihan stroking Mo Ran's hair, saying, "Repay kindness, do not seek revenge."

He saw Mo Ran holding the box of desserts Xue Meng had given him, nibbling cautiously on a sweet, making sure not to waste a single crumb.

He saw Mo Ran standing before a wine shop in Wuchang Town, wearing the uniform of a new disciple. He took a handful of silver from his pocket and presented it to the shopkeeper, then grinned, bashful yet eager. "A jar of your best pear-blossom white wine, please. And could you put it in a pretty jar? I want to give it to my shizun."

The memories floated up one after another. The kindest, purest, best parts of Mo Ran's past, flashing by like a brilliant carousel lantern. Within those scenes, Mo Ran was always smiling—from his destitute childhood to the years of his youth before the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows took root. But those memories, though beautiful, were scant. Throughout his life, Mo Ran had known too few moments of true innocence: His days of carefree laughter could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Chu Wanning watched each one of those bygone events rush past. Everything became calm. Their souls had lain entwined for so long that Chu Wanning could *feel* how deeply Mo Ran had loved him, respected him, cherished him, and adored him in the time before the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. It didn't matter that Chu Wanning's smiles were rare; it didn't matter that he was strict when teaching cultivation. Mo Ran had loved him all the same. Despite Chu Wanning's icy and aloof exterior, Mo Ran had found him so familiar and kind, had seen through to the heart of gold beneath.

Mo Ran had loved him… All those years ago, Mo Ran had loved him, passionately and sincerely.

The memories swirled again in Chu Wanning's mind. He followed their thread until he found himself bathed in the cool air of a moonlit night.

Within the disciples' quarters of Sisheng Peak, a single candle was lit. Mo Ran sat at his table in front of an open book, painstakingly embroidering a white handkerchief. After a few clumsy stitches, he pricked his finger; a drop of blood fell onto the fabric.

Mo Ran's eyes widened. His face fell, and he heaved a sigh. "This is so hard." He balled up the handkerchief and threw it aside. Then he grabbed a fresh one to begin embroidering anew.

His candle burned deep into the night as he discarded countless handkerchiefs. Eventually he got the hang of it, more or less. A delicate pink petal took shape on the fabric, then another, and another…five petals in total. Each stitch was careful. The fumbling youth drew his needle and thread through the pure-white handkerchief, and upon it blossomed a haitang that would never wither.

Mo Ran gazed at his handiwork with shining eyes. Truth be told, the end result was something of an eyesore. The stitches were jagged and uneven, obviously the work of a novice. But Mo Ran was delighted. His eyes danced in excitement, and he tossed the handkerchief into the air. The soft fabric fluttered down and landed on his face, covering his features. He laughed out loud and blew the fabric up again. A corner of the haitang handkerchief lifted, revealing gentle eyes that glowed as if lit from within.

"I'll give this one to Shizun. He'll like it for sure."

His heart was overflowing with warmth—the very kind that, in times to come, the gu flower would devour entirely, so antithetical was it to the flower's poisonous existence.

"Every time he uses this handkerchief, he'll think of me."

Mo Ran tucked the gift into his lapels. He pictured over and over again how Chu Wanning would praise him, how happy he'd look when he received it. The thought made his heart leap with irrepressible joy.

That very night, he scampered over to Chu Wanning's residence. He found his teacher standing by the pond, watching the fish.

"Shizun!" He bounded over, glowing with anticipation.

Chu Wanning turned his head, taken aback. "What are you doing here?"

"I—*achoo*!"

It was a chilly day, and Mo Ran had rushed outside without an outer robe. Before he could finish his sentence, he interrupted himself with a sneeze.

"Why are you in such a rush that you forgot to put on a coat?" asked Chu Wanning, eyeing him.

Mo Ran rubbed his nose and grinned. "I couldn't wait. There's something I have to give to Shizun—otherwise, I won't be able to

sleep."

"What is it?"

"I made a gift for Shizun, to thank you for accepting me as your disciple," he said. He reached carefully into his robes and produced the neatly folded handkerchief. Now that it was time to present his gift, he suddenly grew timid, and his face turned pink. "It…it's not worth much. And it's not—it's not very pretty."

He hesitated, then hastily hid the handkerchief behind his back. He scraped the ground with the tip of his shoe, clearly ill at ease.

"What did you buy?" Chu Wanning asked, staring.

The youth's ears had gone a deep red. "I didn't buy it; I don't have any money…" he mumbled, abashed.

Chu Wanning blinked in surprise. "You made it yourself?"

Mo Ran lowered his head, his eyes shadowed by lashes soft as mist, and hummed softly in assent. Before Chu Wanning could reply, he blurted, "Actually, forget it—it's really ugly, really really ugly!" He fell silent, then immediately felt he hadn't said enough. When he finally gathered the courage to look at Chu Wanning again, he added emphatically: "*Extremely* ugly."

Chu Wanning still remembered how he'd felt back then: bewildered, yet pleasantly surprised. He'd never received a handmade gift from anyone before. But he was too embarrassed to say this, or even to smile. He put on his most wooden expression, terrified this newest disciple of his would glimpse the tenderness stirring in his chest.

Clearing his throat, Chu Wanning said, very sensibly, "Seeing as you've already made it, you should at least show it to me, no matter how ugly it is."

At last, Mo Ran held out the handkerchief. He'd intended to present it with both hands, but the instant he did, he realized the fabric had gotten creased from all his fumbling. He hurriedly tried to smooth it out.

While his face burned, a slender hand reached out and took that handkerchief that had so tormented him. All of his fidgeting instantly ceased. Mo Ran blurted out a graceless "Ah," then: "Shizun, it's really so ugly…"

Back then, Chu Wanning had yet to develop any romantic feelings for Mo Ran. But he remembered those beautiful, bright black eyes, gleaming like dew on a flower.

Sometimes love struck like lightning, and sometimes love wore

one down like water through a rock. For Chu Wanning, it was the latter. Drop by drop, this young man's warmth had soaked into his heart. In the moment, he never realized how ardent every glance and smile were, how strong their aftershocks would be. By the time he noticed what had happened, that warmth had pooled into a mire into which he'd sunken too deep to have any hope of extricating himself.

"A handkerchief?"

"Mn… Mm-hmm."

It was a white square of silk with a pink haitang blossom embroidered near the edge. The stitches were careful, sturdy, and endearingly clumsy.

A tremor rippled through the empty valley of Chu Wanning's heart, and a fresh stream trickled through, petals floating on the water's surface. He gazed down at that handkerchief for a long moment, without any idea of what to say. It was the first time he'd ever received such a gift.

Seeing him silent, Mo Ran thought he didn't like it. "I-I copied a pattern from a book," he stammered. "Actually, uh… You can buy handkerchiefs like this in town, and they're not very expensive. And the embroidery is way…way nicer than mine."

By the end he was becoming distraught; he moved to snatch the handkerchief back. But Chu Wanning was faster—he'd already impassively tucked the handkerchief into his own robes. "Unacceptable. How could a new disciple take back a gift for their teacher?"

The warmth of Mo Ran's body still lingered on that rumpled handkerchief. It was ugly indeed. Down in Wuchang Town, he could buy eight like it for ten copper coins. But in Chu Wanning's eyes, it was precious; he didn't want to give it back.

Thus did this handkerchief become the very first thing Mo Ran gave Chu Wanning. After the flower's curse took hold, both this swath of memories and that white square of silk were erased from Mo Weiyu's mind.

Chu Wanning was taciturn and easily embarrassed; he never brought up the gift again of his own accord. Later, as he watched Mo Ran become more and more infatuated with Shi Mei, following the other boy like a shadow and plying him with dozens of gifts, Chu Wanning's silence grew more enduring still. He no longer liked to use the handkerchief in front of Mo Ran if he could avoid it. The gift had been a casual bit of charity on Mo Ran's part, but Chu Wanning cherished it deeply.

He remembered…

His earth soul had fused back together, dragging the past along with it. Memories like this one filtered into Chu Wanning's mind.

He rose from the bed. Never had he known such fury, dread, sadness, or pain. His hands were shaking.

At last, he knew the whole truth; he knew how everything had begun. Mo Ran hadn't merely been framed in his childhood. He hadn't just fallen under Shi Mei's enchantment. That was far from all. The most important memories had been suppressed by Shi Mei's flower. For twenty years, for two lifetimes, no one had known the truth—until today.

The truth, the whole truth… *This* was the real truth!

There was no one left on Mount Jiao to stop him. Chu Wanning rushed down the mountain in a single-minded panic. He stopped in the nearest village and asked if anyone knew Mo Ran's whereabouts.

"That Mo-zongshi?" Oblivious as to whom he was speaking, the villager crassly said, "Some shit zongshi he is! Hypocritical beast."

Hypocritical beast… Criminal…

Tyrant.

The world swam before his eyes—two lifetimes running together. The past lifetime's Taxian-jun curled his lip in a spine-chilling sneer, and the present lifetime's Mo Weiyu lowered his eyes in a soft smile.

No. None of that was the truth.

"Where is he?" asked Chu Wanning, white as a sheet.

"Tianyin Pavilion," the villager replied. "Everyone in the upper and lower cultivation realms has already heard about his heinous crimes. His spiritual core's supposed to be carved out today—serves him right too!"

It was as though a mountain was collapsing in Chu Wanning's head; his skull was rattling. "When?!"

Chu Wanning's flashing phoenix eyes and the frantic edge in voice gave the villager a fright. "I-I'm not sure—I think it's…at noon?"

Noon… Noon… Chu Wanning glanced at the sundial next to the threshing floor and froze.

With a great gust, the Rising Dragon Talisman burst out of thin air. Chu Wanning ordered the paper dragon to take him into the skies and head for Tianyin Pavilion's territories in Shandong. The dragon was ready to quarrel with its master as usual until it caught sight of

Chu Wanning's too-wet eyes.

The paper dragon was stupefied. "What's wrong with you?"

"Help me."

The little creature had never seen Chu Wanning like this; it found itself at a loss. "When has this venerable one ever *not* helped you—aiya, don't cry."

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth in threat, but it was nothing more than pretense. The truth was a termite, boring through his spine. "I'm not crying. Take me to Tianyin Pavilion before it's too late!"

"What do you need to go there for?"

"To save someone." He couldn't stop shaking. He didn't want to cry—he never wanted to cry—but tears finally ran down his cheeks. Chu Wanning swiped ruthlessly at his scarlet eyes. "To save someone who's been wrongly convicted."

The paper dragon didn't know what to say.

"If there's anyone in the world who deserves to have their spiritual core dug out, who deserves to be condemned by all, it shouldn't be him," Chu Wanning rasped. "I have to clear his name."

The paper dragon asked no more questions. It transformed into a great beast with ferocious horns and let out an earth-shaking roar. With Chu Wanning on its back, it arced through the skies, whiskers quivering as they crashed through the frigid sea of clouds.

Chu Wanning sat behind its horns. The wind gusted over his face, terrifyingly cold at such heights. His fingertips felt frozen. He looked straight ahead through the interweaving mists and saw the undulating mountains, the meandering rivers. All the sights of the mortal realm streamed past below like so many bygone days.

From the instant he'd awoken, he had felt mad, numb, shattered. It wasn't until now, when he had the space to catch his breath, that sorrow crashed over him. He slowly curled into himself on the dragon, making himself small, and buried his face in his hands.

The wind whistled past his ears.

They were interrogating Mo Ran; they were opening up his heart, breaking apart his core—they said he was beyond redemption, that he deserved death.

No. This wasn't right.

The roar of the wind was loud enough to drown out all the foolish sentiments of mortals. Within the clouds and the cutting gale, Chu Wanning, at last, let himself sob.

Over these two fleeting lifetimes, neither Taxian-jun nor Mo-zongshi should have ended up like this. There was one thing Mo Ran was right about. When Mo Ran had asked to become his disciple beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower, it had been a mistake from the very beginning.

The sun inched higher. The bronze water clock outside Tianyin Pavilion reached the designated hour, and the official struck the bell, scattering the frightened sparrows.

"Noon has arrived!" she cried. "Commence the punishment!"

Mo Ran was hoisted up onto the stockade and bound with immortal-binding ropes. His outer robe was stripped off, and his collar yanked open.

Mu Yanli stepped up to him, eyes frigid, her holy weapon—a sheathed dagger—in hand. "Today, we grant you punishment, in hopes that you will repent."

Her lips parted around the ancient mantra of Tianyin Pavilion.

"The sound of heaven rings out; thou shalt not covet.

The sound of heaven lives on; thou shalt not lust.

The sound of heaven carries far; thou shalt not blaspheme.

The sound of heaven knows mercy, and thus honors thee."

Lowering her eyes, she bowed to Mo Ran—a farewell. There was a shower of sparks as she drew her blade from the sheath, and the holy weapon hummed, scattering golden motes of light. Her eyes, reflected in the dagger's gleaming surface, were devoid of emotion.

Some below hid their faces, while others craned their necks. A few sighed and closed their eyes, while many clapped and whooped. This crowd was like any other: It contained multitudes.

"We will commence carving out the spiritual core."

Mu Yanli's hand rose, and the blade came down. Blood splattered.

The silence was deafening.

Someone screamed from the stands, his voice piercing the highest heavens: "*Ge—!*"

Hot, vivid red poured out as the holy weapon plunged into Mo Ran's chest.

He didn't close his eyes. At first, he felt nothing. Only after a beat did he blankly look down at the gory mess that had been his heart. His lips parted. Then the pain exploded like fireworks going off in his chest. Light and shadow merged and roiled before his eyes. He coughed violently, blood spurting from his mouth. Each drop filled the air with the stink of iron as the heavens and earth blurred into a cold sea of scarlet.

But it was wrong, all wrong.

Chu Wanning, on dragonback, hurtled toward Tianyin Pavilion as fast as he could fly.

Once, he'd thought Mo Ran's indifference toward him and flippant disregard for others were born of hatred and resentment. He'd thought his own harshness and rebukes had made Mo Ran forget the small bit of warmth between them.

But he'd been wrong about everything. Those memories had been trapped in Mo Ran's souls all along. Chu Wanning had seen them —he'd seen the deepest emotions in Mo Ran's heart, the care and devotion the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows had stripped away.

Back then, Mo Ran had been boyish and innocent; his heart, warm and healthy, had beat steadily within his chest. He'd watched his new teacher standing by the lacquered window. Chu Wanning turned his head, eyes pale in the bright light. "Mo Ran, come here."

As Mo Ran stepped closer, he saw a brush and paper set before Chu Wanning, along with an inkstick and stone.

"The sect leader mentioned you don't know how to write your courtesy name. Take the brush—I'll teach you."

Chu Wanning had instructed him, his voice clear and smooth,

ethereal as the almond blossoms fluttering outside the window. “The sect leader gave you the courtesy name Weiyu. Its meaning—*gentle rain*—is the opposite of your given name, Ran—*to ignite*. I’ll write it for you; pay close attention.”

Every stroke and line of his teacher’s handwriting was vigorous and assured. His little disciple looked on, somewhat dazed, and tried to copy what he did.

“There’s an extra dot.”

“This time you’re missing a dot.”

Chu Wanning had to teach him both characters five times before Mo Ran managed to write them correctly. Even then, his penmanship was dreadful. Having never encountered such a dense disciple before, Chu Wanning was a little vexed. “Is it that hard?”

No, it wasn’t hard. But Mo Ran was too shy to say that Chu Wanning was just too beautiful when he looked down to write. Mo Ran irresistibly craved the sight, so he added and missed strokes on purpose, earning an extra lesson each time.

“It’s very hard.”

Chu Wanning gave him a look of reproach. “Watch closely. Stop giggling.”

Mo Ran curved his lips in a small smile and adopted a look of earnest confusion. “Then, Shizun—could you please show me one more time?”

He simply loved that moment when Chu Wanning lowered his head, the ends of his phoenix eyes sweeping elegantly upward. When Chu Wanning held his hand like this and taught him, he could hear the whisper of haitang blossoms opening outside the window.

The sentencing platform was surrounded by a tall barrier. No one could stand in the way of Tianyin Pavilion’s punishment.

Mu Yanli’s keen dagger moved on its own, carrying out its master’s intent. Her eyes were cold, as though she could neither hear Mo Ran’s harsh panting nor see the deathly pallor of his face, much less the veins protruding from his temples or the blood oozing from the corners of his mouth. She merely carried out the judgment rendered by the divine scales: *Carve out the spiritual core*.

The dagger plunged into his heart, digging into the muscle to pick out fragments of his core, then swiftly ripping them out. The sharp tip inevitably tore into the flesh around it, but Mu Yanli paid it no heed. She flicked gore into a silver tray held by a nearby attendant

along with those softly glowing shards.

A healer stepped forward to staunch the bleeding and suppress the spasming of his heart, ensuring Mo Ran would live through his sentence. The scales had deemed that his spiritual core should be carved out, so Tianyin Pavilion would preserve his life. At the very least, his death would not occur on the sentencing platform. They kept him conscious to avoid any doubt over whether he was passed out or on the verge of death. So Mo Ran watched as his heart was sliced open, as the blade sought out the fragments of his core, and as his flesh knitted back together, over and over again.

In the stands, Xue Meng was mindless with grief. Face buried in his hands, his tears fell like rain as he howled. “Ge…”

Mo Ran’s mind was foggy, his every muscle taut from the pain. Yet he felt like he was finally being set free. With each stroke of Mu Yanli’s blade—piercing his heart, excising his broken core—it was as if his sins from his past life and the blood on his hands faded ever so slightly.

When this pain was over, would he be forgiven? When his core was gone, could he return to the past?

Yet what past would he return to? If he went back to the Heaven-Piercing Tower on the day he chose a teacher, he would still be a false gongzi of Sisheng Peak, a youth who’d watched his mother starve to death long ago. That happiness would be nothing more than an illusion. If he went back to the woodshed in which he’d spent his childhood, he and Duan Yihan would still spend their days barely scraping by. He would live in fear that some fickle twist of fate might prevent him from meeting Chu Wanning. His happiness would be tainted by regret.

He cast back through his memories, but he couldn’t find a single point in either lifetime where he’d be able to start over again without worries. He couldn’t find any stretch of time—not even a single day—when he’d been truly carefree, with his belly full and warm clothes on his back. He’d lived through two lifetimes, more than forty years in total, but he’d never known a night of peace.

Mu Yanli’s dagger was digging through his flesh at the behest of heaven itself. He knew his souls were unbearably filthy, his crimes irredeemable. The will of heaven would have always descended upon him, sooner or later. Yet at that moment, he felt a sharp twinge of grief. He wanted his mother, his shifu, his didi, his uncle and auntie; he wanted a home. He’d probably been too greedy, wanting so much. And now, in the end, he had nothing at all.

All the happiness and warmth he'd ever known were fake. Like water streaming through a loosely woven basket, like sand slipping through his fingers. He'd done all he could to mend his flaws, yet he couldn't hold onto anything. He crouched on the banks of the great river of life, holding his sodden little basket, but found it empty. He could only stare at the waters as they rushed past, elusive. That tiny, shabby basket was all he'd ever had. He clutched it ever tighter, scooping up a dream that was destined to fall apart.

Chapter 276:
I'm Coming to the Grave with You

THE MOOD on the sentencing platform was somber. The dagger's tip coaxed the fragments of Mo Ran's core out, one after another. He steeled himself against the pain, enduring with everything he had. Paying for his sins was one thing, but showing weakness to these people was another. He was like an immovable boulder, refusing to cry out before Mu Yanli.

But the pain was all-consuming; he drifted upon the ocean of his agony.

"Mo Ran!"

The voice was like a bolt from the blue, a spring thunderclap exploding in his head. Impossible. How? How could he be here…? Surely the pain was making him hallucinate, muddling his mind.

"Mo Ran!"

Distantly, he heard a commotion rise around him. People were gasping and shouting, and a fierce wind whipped down from the sky. Mu Yanli's hand stilled. Shaking, Mo Ran summoned all his strength to raise his head.

He saw his god on the back of a dragon, soaring down from the heavens. He saw his god in fluttering white robes, an immortal fallen to earth. As that face framed by the dragon's craggy horns drew closer, Mo Ran's heart spasmed, a pain worse than any stab of the knife.

His god was crying. Chu Wanning…was crying.

"Shi…zun…"

Blood ran from the wound on Mo Ran's chest as he thrashed, chains clanking.

Chu Wanning leapt down from the great dragon's back. As he landed outside the barrier around the sentencing platform, the dragon vanished in a beam of golden light, returning to its talisman.

"Yuheng!"

"Shizun!"

"Yuheng Elder!"

The entirety of Sisheng Peak was on their feet in the stands. Audience members from other sects started in surprise, and even some

of the commoners gasped in astonishment. “The legendary Beidou Immortal?”

“It’s Mo Ran’s shifu!”

“But I thought they fell out?”

The rims of Chu Wanning’s eyes were already scarlet. Yet when he saw the mess of blood and core fragments in that silver tray, his despair compounded. His throat burned; he wanted to speak, but his words caught on a sob as they burst from his lips. “You can’t…treat him like this…”

An uproar broke out on all sides.

“What did he say?!”

“Has he lost his mind? Mo Ran is a savage—a murderer!”

Every shout was like a knife to Chu Wanning’s heart, every rebuke an awl punching into his chest.

It hurt so much.

Chu Wanning looked at the man trapped behind Tianyin Pavilion’s barrier, that man whose wet black eyes gazed back at him in silence, whose heart had been flayed open, whose core had been ravaged.

That man who still didn’t know he’d been wronged even as the world condemned him.

What a dummy.

Chu Wanning’s whole body was racked with shivers. He pressed a hand to the transparent barrier. “You’re making a mistake…” he croaked. “You’ve got it all wrong…”

Stop stabbing him with that dagger—turn it on me instead. Stab me instead…

Everyone said Taxian-jun was heartless, that Mo Weiyu was morally deficient. In the past life, he’d been reviled by the masses, condemned by all. In this life, he’d passed each day in trepidation, hounded by his guilt.

But did anyone know the truth?

Mu Yanli seemed to be getting impatient. When her initial shock had passed, she raised the dagger once more. Blood dripped from its point.

“Don’t look,” Mo Ran muttered. With a sickening wet noise, the blade plunged again into his chest. Scarlet streamed out.

Chu Wanning’s pupils contracted to pinpricks. The world seemed

to stand still; then a scream tore from his throat: "*No—!*"

Golden light flashed and a gale swirled up as Tianwen materialized and lashed at the barrier. Dozens of Tianyin Pavilion's top disciples were maintaining the spell, but this single strike was more than they could withstand. They fell to their knees, coughing up blood, and the barrier ruptured in an instant.

Chu Wanning stood within a dazzling halo of light, holy weapon held aloft, sparks flying. He flew toward the center of the sentencing platform.

"Someone's trying to steal the prisoner!"

"Chu Wanning wants to set him free!"

Mu Yanli shoved the silver tray with the shards of Mo Ran's spiritual core into her qiankun pouch. Whirling, she barked, "Stop him!"

"Yes, Pavilion Master!"

Tianyin Pavilion stepped forward in a wave of gold, clashing with Chu Wanning's spiritual energy. The cultivators in the stands were stupefied: No one had ever seen Chu Wanning this frantic and desperate, completely without reason.

Mu Yanli cursed under her breath as she saw Chu Wanning approach. Eyes glinting like ice, she cut out a final shard of Mo Ran's core and dropped it into her qiankun pouch. Then she turned to meet Chu Wanning head-on, robes whipping in the wind. "Chu-zongshi, do you truly intend to save him? Think carefully—if you commit to this, the burden of infamy will fall upon you both!"

The light of the sword glares lit Mu Yanli's almond eyes as she stared down Chu Wanning. Tianwen wrapped around Mu Yanli's blade and snapped it with a crackle of sparks. Every word was ground between Chu Wanning's teeth as he replied, "Then I will gladly bear that burden with him!"

The annals of history are well-recorded, filled with the names of heroes. But all I want is for us to be together. Whether we're spoken of in the chronicles of a tyrant's reign or rot on a list of despicable outlaws, I'll accept it. When people mention us in the future, I don't want them to uplift me as a god while condemning you as a devil. When the history books tell of these times, I don't want them to write that you and I turned on each other, that master and disciple became enemies.

Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu, Taxian-jun. If I cannot clear your name of the wrongs you have suffered, then I'll endure eternal disgrace by your side.

Hell is too cold. Mo Ran, I'm coming to the grave with you.

In the swirling mist, the brilliant light of the battle dazzled the eyes of the combatants. Those on the stands and below them were even more disoriented. In the chaos, all they could make out were two metallic clangs as Tianwen broke the chains binding Mo Ran.

Crumpling to his knees, Mo Ran collapsed into Chu Wanning's warm embrace. His blood instantly dyed Chu Wanning's white robes scarlet. Through it all, he hadn't shed a single tear; he hadn't let out a single sob when they pierced his heart. Now his composure crumbled at last. He raised shaking hands, only to lower them again. He wanted so badly to hold Chu Wanning, but he equally wanted to push him away. He desperately hoped to stay by Chu Wanning's side, yet he wished just as earnestly that Chu Wanning would never come to harm; that he would remain always pristine, untouched by his filth. He didn't know if he should put his arms around him, or if he should shrink away.

Mo Ran's hands trembled, hovering in midair for an age. At last, he cautiously placed them on Chu Wanning's back. He wept. "Shizun… Why don't you blame me… Why are you saving me…"

Chu Wanning's heart ached like it would shatter. He wrapped his arms more tightly around Mo Ran, heedless of the watching crowd. There was so much to say, but he didn't know where to begin.

"I'm so filthy… I'll get you filthy too…" Mo Ran said softly, his voice thick with blood. He sobbed, inconsolable. In Chu Wanning's arms, this man who never showed weakness in front of others was stripped of his armor. "I was scared you wouldn't want me anymore… Where else can I go if even you don't want me…"

It was Mo Ran's core that had been broken, Mo Ran's heart that had been torn into—but in that moment, Chu Wanning felt his own heart convulsing, disintegrating from a thousand wounds, mangled beyond repair. So close were they that their flesh and blood were inextricably linked.

Tianyin Pavilion's cultivators surrounded them, pressing in from all sides. Chu Wanning stood against them in white robes dyed red. He held Tianwen in one hand and Mo Ran in the other.

In the mortal realm, many things that seemed clear-cut were, upon second glance, not so simple as they first appeared. Justice rooted in self-righteousness was all too common, and selfish scheming was everywhere. The poet Qu Yuan filled his bosom with sand and walked into the weeping Miluo River. The general Yue Fei shouldered his false charges and departed with regrets unsung at Fengbo Pavilion.[1] Though history ultimately cleared their names, the same could not be said for countless young and innocent loyal hearts. Not

every wrongful accusation could be refuted. Many victims were consigned to the dark without a chance to present the truth.

Holding Mo Ran, Chu Wanning said softly, “You don’t have to worry. I’d never abandon you.”

“Shizun…”

“I’ll always be with you. In life or in death, I’ll always bring you home.”

With the disruption of the healing spell, Mo Ran’s awareness began to blur, and the pain in his heart worsened. But a shudder ran through him when he heard Chu Wanning’s reassurance. Tears ran down his face, and he smiled. “You’re so good to me; my basket is full… I’m so happy…” He paused, his voice thinning almost to nothing. “Shizun, I’m so tired… I’m cold…”

Fine shivers wracked Chu Wanning. He drew Mo Ran closer still, passing a continuous stream of spiritual energy through the hand holding him. But it was futile. Just as in the past life when Taxian-jun had held Chu Wanning himself, trying to save him as he sighed out his dying breaths at the summit of Kunlun Mountain—it was no use.

Chu Wanning was frantic with grief. Silent tears streamed from his reddened phoenix eyes, but still he smoothed Mo Ran’s hair and bent to kiss his clammy forehead. “Stay with me,” he rasped. “Tell me —which basket do you mean?”

At the edge of his awareness, he could feel that those around them wore expressions of wariness, scorn, menace, hatred, and disgust. But so what—none of it mattered anymore. Not his reputation, not his dignity, nor his life. Over two lifetimes he’d watched Mo Ran sink into the abyss, yet his hands had been tied. He felt only endless torment, that he’d failed so wretchedly.

He’d come too late.

Mo Ran’s consciousness was fast fading. He was bleeding freely, and the warmth ran from his body with his blood. “You see, I have only this one little basket,” he explained quietly. “My basket’s full of holes. I’ve been trying for ages to catch something, but…it’s still empty…” He curled into himself unconsciously, his voice a broken whisper through ashen lips. “Shizun… My heart, it hurts… Hold me, please?”

Chu Wanning’s own heart throbbed unbearably. He murmured again and again, “I’ve got you. Pain, pain, go away…”

But Mo Ran could no longer hear him. His mind was in chaos, everything a mess. He was once again that helpless child freezing and

starving in a ramshackle shed. He was that sobbing, howling child kneeling beside his mother's rotting corpse in a mass grave.

He was Emperor Taxian-jun, unable to return to the past, that solitary silhouette beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

He was the wandering Mo-zongshi, waiting for Chu Wanning's souls to return. That man curled up in his bed on a rainy night, his pillow soaked with tears.

"It hurts. It really—it hurts so much… Shizun, have I paid my debts? Am I clean yet…"

The world blurred.

"Shizun." At last, his voice—the voice of that boy, that youth, that monster, that tyrant, that little disciple—cracked on a sob and faded like a wisp of smoke. "It's so dark, I'm scared. I want to go home…"

Chu Wanning was hanging on Mo Ran's every word. At this, a sob wracked him, stealing his breath away.

Mo Ran, Mo Ran, why are you such a dummy? Paying your debts? Being cleansed? I'm the one who owes you. No one knew the truth. Even your own memories of it were erased. But now I do.

I know how you sacrificed two lifetimes to protect me, even though you'd been my disciple only a few months when the choice was before you. You bore infamy, condemnation, and slander; you were dragged into madness, bloodlust, and filth. If not for you, the person kneeling on the Platform of Repentance today would be me. The person whose heart was carved out would be me!

Emperor Taxian-jun had sacrificed his souls to protect Yuheng of the Night Sky. From that point on, one had tumbled into the darkness, while the other had lingered in the light.

All of it was wrong.

Tianyin Pavilion's forces burst from the skies like panthers pouncing upon a long-awaited kill, wicked claws bared. A hundred-strong horde streaked toward Chu Wanning and Mo Ran.

Tianwen's golden light burned brighter, an eye-searing white.

"Kill them!"

"Don't let them go!"

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. Murderous shouts filled the air. They were beset from all sides; the disciples brandished their weapons and bore down upon them.

Within the bright web of flashing blades, Chu Wanning's eyes

snapped open. He lowered one hand, spreading his fingers wide. A furious wind rose as he bellowed, “Huaisha, come!”

Chapter 277:
This Venerable One Is So Lonesome

In answer to his summons, a vicious blade wreathed in coruscating golden light burst into existence in his hand.

Everyone's jaws dropped. Tianyin Pavilion's high-level disciples first stepped back in alarm, then squared their shoulders to meet him. "Don't retreat!" one of them shouted. "We can't let them go!"

"Evil must be vanquished! Pull it out by the roots!"

Both sides had advanced too far to withdraw. The atmosphere crackled with tension.

"Now!"

The platform exploded with light and sound like water falling into a pot of sizzling oil. A flurry of spells and sharp blades whirled toward the center, where Chu Wanning held Mo Ran. Chu Wanning parried with Huaisha, its piercing golden light repulsing each blow. He stood alone against that rushing tide of cultivators. His phoenix eyes—reflecting the sword glares and spattering blood—were eerily calm.

To guard Mo Ran, he would offer up his sword, his body, his life, and all his innocence from this point onward. No one would listen to his explanations; no one would allow these two desperate, trapped beasts a path of escape. There was no hope, no salvation, no faith, no light.

All they had left was one another.

"Mo Ran, hang in there. I'll get you out of here."

A curse struck Chu Wanning's arm; bright blood spurted from a gash that cut to the bone. But Chu Wanning only bit his lip and swung his sword.

"Watch out!" a cultivator yelled in alarm. "Get out of the way!"

Huaisha's might was terrifying to behold. This single stroke raised a boom like a clap of thunder as sand flew into the air. Tendrils of sword qi lashed out, and an abyssal chasm opened in the earth at Chu Wanning's feet.

"Chu Wanning!" Mu Yanli cried sharply. "Do you not recognize the will of heaven?" Receiving no answer, she raged, "Do you intend to openly oppose the descendants of the gods? To violate divine ordinance?!"

“Stand down, Beidou Immortal,” someone shouted from the crowd of spectators. “Do you want to become a criminal within the cultivation realm?!”

Huaisha’s explosive spiritual energy prevented anyone from drawing closer. Chu Wanning turned his face a fraction to glance at Tianyin Pavilion’s forces. “I already am,” he said.

Gritting his teeth, he turned back and hefted Mo Ran’s bleeding, barely conscious form over his shoulder. “Don’t be afraid,” he rasped. “It’s over. We’re leaving; we’re going home… I’ll bring you home.”

Yet when he looked around, the road before him was paved with the corpses of Tianyin Pavilion’s cultivators. Behind their broken bodies stood another rank of scarlet-eyed soldiers, ready to put their lives on the line.

And where was home? They had no place to go. Nowhere but hell would be willing to take them in.

Chu Wanning had no idea how many he’d killed by the time he won himself free of the fray. He was shaking from head to toe as he shot out of Tianyin Pavilion, bringing Mo Ran to the highest reaches of the sky on his sword. Never before had he taken so many innocent lives. He was covered in Mo Ran’s blood, his own blood, and the blood of Tianyin Pavilion’s martyrs most of all. He’d been tarnished, soaked through in filth; he could never wash himself clean.

Mists drifted before his eyes, the world a boundless blur.

Where should they go? Mount Jiao was not an option, Dragonblood Mountain was no longer safe… Sisheng Peak… How could he bear to involve Sisheng Peak any further?

“Shizun…”

A hoarse whimper by his ear. Chu Wanning jerked his head down to look at Mo Ran’s paper-white face.

“You…should take me back.”

“What the hell are you saying?!”

Mo Ran shook his head. “You came for me. You didn’t abandon me.” With great effort, he bent his mouth in a smile despite the faltering light in his eyes. “That’s more than enough. I have a home—it’s enough. Take me back, I mean it… You still have a way out…” His voice grew fainter, his lashes drooping, but still he gripped Chu Wanning’s sleeve and mumbled, “You still have a way out…”

“I don’t.” Chu Wanning’s heart felt like it was being sliced in two. Grabbing Mo Ran’s ice-cold hand, he shifted his weight so he could wrap his arms all the way around Mo Ran. “I don’t have a way

out. I'm not going anywhere."

Mo Ran fell silent.

"I'll stay with you."

Had Chu Wanning voiced such words in the past, Mo Ran would've lost his mind with joy. But now he only felt lost and bewildered. He lifted a hand, but that was all he had the strength to do.

His robes were sodden with blood. Mo Ran lost consciousness at last, sagging in Chu Wanning's arms.

Chu Wanning clutched at that body that was weakening by the minute and couldn't stand to keep going. He didn't know whether or not more forces were tailing them, or how long it might take them to catch up. He brought Huaisha down and landed on a nearby hill. His hands were trembling violently; he fumbled several times before managing to pull open Mo Ran's collar.

A gaping, bloody hole had been opened over his heart.

A small explosion seemed to go off in Chu Wanning's head. He didn't have the courage to look at Mo Ran's face again. He suddenly remembered that Mo Ran had guarded his corpse for two full years in the past lifetime. How must he have felt through each of the long days and nights over those two endless years?

"Don't go, Mo Ran…" Chu Wanning folded his hands together and pressed his palms over the wound, funneling a steady stream of spiritual energy into Mo Ran's body. He crouched protectively over him, like two flayed beasts both soaked in gore, clinging to their last breaths. As their judgment day drew nigh, their blood and flesh intermingled.

"You can't go—you didn't do anything wrong. You never did anything wrong."

Mo Ran, Mo Ran—*Mo*, the darkness of ink; *Ran*, the brightness of fire. He'd striven toward the light all his life, yet in the end, he couldn't escape the clutches of the night.

Chu Wanning finally mustered the nerve to look up at Mo Ran's face, but that one glance was nearly enough to destroy him. Mo Ran's complexion lacked any hint of vitality, shockingly white and streaked with blood. Cuts and scrapes crisscrossed his brow from the stones onlookers had thrown at him.

The sight broke him. Kneeling in front of Mo Ran, he buried his head in his arms and wept inconsolably. Agony bored through his chest.

Was this the same youth who'd come to him beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower, who'd flashed him that bright and lively smile and said, *Xianjun, Xianjun, pay attention to me?*

Why… Why was there so much blood—why was he so lifeless; where had that smile gone? He could hardly recognize him like this.

What wrong had Mo Weiyu committed for him to bear such sorrow and suffering throughout his life? Was it because he had nothing and no one to rely on that even fate had decided to torment him? He'd lived always on the fringes, trying so hard to present the world with a smile, only for everyone to declare his face abhorrent.

Seeing him now, who would guess that such a lowly heap of dirt had once flourished at the height of spring?

"Chu Wanning."

He froze as a familiar, cold voice rang out from nearby.

"Who could've guessed you'd willingly ruin your reputation to save him?"

Chu Wanning's head jerked up. A man's tall, well-built silhouette stalked toward them with unhurried steps, his back to the sun.

Emperor Taxian-jun paused amidst the trees and narrowed his eyes. "I always thought your own purity was the most important thing in the world to you," he drawled. "I never expected you'd tarnish yourself for him."

He drew closer, one step at a time, the dragon motifs stitched into his black robe glinting in the sun. His red shoes, undulating with dragon coils embroidered in black and gold, came to a stop in front of Chu Wanning and Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning shot to his feet, gold gathering in his palm as he instinctively summoned Tianwen. He stood between Mo Ran's past and present lives. Taxian-jun's eyes roved first along the sparking willow vine, then fixed impassively upon Chu Wanning's face. He looked as if he'd been fished out of a pool of blood. Not a single inch of his robes remained white. The ends of his phoenix eyes were wet as he met Taxian-jun's gaze with a complicated expression.

Taxian-jun snorted. "He's that important to you?"

When Chu Wanning made no reply, Taxian-jun said, tone laced with threat, "Move aside."

Chu Wanning didn't budge. His mind was a jumble, but he knew this at least: that the Mo Ran who stood before him now was naught but a means to an end, an empty shell.

The empty shell continued to smile, lips hooking cruelly. “What—you think you can stop this venerable one just by standing there?”

“I’m taking him away.”

“To where?”

A simple question, but one that slipped between Chu Wanning’s ribs like a knife prying open a clam. Emperor Taxian-jun’s eyes gleamed with mockery. “Chu Wanning, be honest with yourself. This venerable one would shelter you, but aside from that, where else in this vast mortal realm could you possibly hide? Taking him away? Don’t be ridiculous.”

He stepped forward. Fast as lightning, he gripped Chu Wanning’s chin and pressed close. “The last piece of spiritual core in his chest belongs to this venerable one. You, too, belong to this venerable one. Don’t forget your place.”

Golden light flared. Taxian-jun leapt back, his cheek stinging. He reached up and found that Tianwen had left an angry gash under his temple. Black blood dripped along his jawline as he looked up darkly. It was hard to say if his expression held more of fury or delight. He wrinkled his nose, features twisting. “Good. Wonderful.”

He chuckled humorlessly and swept back his sleeves, black robes rippling like storm clouds. “To think this venerable one would face Tianwen again after so many years.” Taxian-jun lifted slender fingers to wipe the blood from his cheek and fixed shadowy eyes on Chu Wanning. “This venerable one has missed it so.”

Behind Chu Wanning, Mo Ran was clinging to life by a thread. A single wasted moment could spell his doom. Chu Wanning’s heart was in turmoil, but he couldn’t waste any more words with Taxian-jun. “Tianwen—Ten Thousand Coffins!”

Taxian-jun swore under his breath. His toes had barely left the ground when thousands of craters opened in the earth. Thick willow vines burst out and shot straight for him. At the same time, softer, more slender vines curled around Mo-zongshi’s unconscious form, shielding him deep within their branches.

Taxian-jun glared at Chu Wanning through Tianwen’s spell formation and let out a furious bark of a laugh. “Are we so different to you?”

“Tianwen, Wind.”

His question was answered by an even more ferocious attack. Taxian-jun found himself speechless as the violent gale sliced toward him like a knife. How could he not feel resentment—as he glared at

that wretched man on the ground, Taxian-jun's heart twinged with a pain he hadn't known in years.

This small moment of distraction was all it took for the tempest to cleave into his belly. He gasped in pain. Lowering his gaze, he saw dark blood welling from an ugly wound in his stomach.

He'd hurt him again…

That's right—in the past and present lifetime alike, he had always amounted to nothing in Chu Wanning's eyes. Taxian-jun swallowed around the lump in his throat. His shallow smile warped into a leer as he reached up and roared, "Bugui, come!"

Our past lies on a vermilion bridge in emerald fields. Another year gone, yet still I wait, for you do not return. But now he'd returned—Chu Wanning had returned, yet he still insisted on drawing his blade against him. He still insisted on finding every stupid reason to seek his blood, to seek his life!

Taxian-jun seethed with rage. Bugui and Tianwen clashed, the two holy weapons screaming where they made contact.

Two lifetimes.

Two lifetimes had passed since these weapons met in their final duel. The inscription on Bugui's hilt had long faded. Like the past once shared by Taxian-jun and the Beidou Immortal, it had been lost to the sands of time.

Beams of gold and jade-green light crashed against each other, consumed by hatred yet inseparably entwined. Amidst the flash of their weapons, Taxian-jun stared at the face before him: covered in blood, expression inscrutable.

Alive.

His heart was seized by an overbearing fury, a burning anguish. Gritting his teeth, he said sullenly, "We're the same person…so why are you fighting me for his sake?"

Chu Wanning didn't know what to say. What reply would be of any use against this revenant? But—perhaps the sunlight was so dazzling it was making him see things—for a moment, Taxian-jun's eyes seemed heavy with sorrow. They seemed, almost, to glimmer with tears.

"It hurts you to see him like this. But what about this venerable one?" Taxian-jun said hoarsely. He tried to summon his forbidding mask, but his despair was too strong to hide. He wished he could take a torch to that disappointment and burn it to ash, but when the flames sprang up, the smoke only turned his eyes red. "Chu Wanning. Have

you any idea how this venerable one felt when I came back to life and discovered your body was gone from the Red Lotus Pavilion?"

Chu Wanning froze.

After blurting this question, Taxian-jun closed his eyes, expression strained. Anger, humiliation, pain, and obsession had pushed him to the brink of sanity. He concentrated nearly all of his spiritual power into Bugui—

With a massive *boom*, the earth rolled and split apart. The surrounding vegetation was obliterated in the blast—even the willow vines were not immune to Bugui's might. They crumbled to dust, one after another.

"It's been almost ten years!"

In the flying dust and ash, only Taxian-jun's manic eyes were clear. His vision was a wash of scarlet. "Ten years, Chu Wanning! He was reborn, leaving this venerable one to be woken at Sisheng Peak, at Wushan Palace. In these ten years, this venerable one has heard tell of all the good things in your lives, all his accomplishments—but what about me? What about *me*?!"

He slashed his blade downward. Sand and gravel exploded as a deep fissure opened in the earth.

"I've been alone since the beginning! He got to start over again, while I had nothing—not even a handful of ashes!"

He swung Bugui again. Chu Wanning recalled Tianwen, and Huaisha flashed into his hand to block the blow. But this golden killing blade only stoked Taxian-jun's fury. He looked like a vengeful ghost escaped from hell, burning up with resentment. Chu Wanning flinched at the look in his eyes. This man was just a corpse. How could his emotions be so intense?

"What did I do to deserve this?!"

The forest burst into flame, leaves dyed orange and edged in char, sparks flying. Yet suddenly Taxian-jun doused his spiritual energy. In a whirl of black robes, he sprang backward and landed within the ruined foliage.

Chu Wanning watched in confusion. He saw Taxian-jun close his eyes, those dense black lashes pressed to that unnaturally pale face. "What did I do to deserve this," mumbled Taxian-jun again.

The ground trembled faintly. Chu Wanning blanched, whipping around. "Mo Ran!"

As he dashed over to shield Mo Ran, he heard Taxian-jun utter four chilling words: "Jiangui. Ten Thousand Coffins."

A colossal eruption rocked the earth. All the blood in Chu Wanning's body ran cold. The willow vine…the willow vine… Taxian-jun and Mo Weiyu were the same person, after all. Just as Mo Weiyu could summon Bugui, so too could Taxian-jun summon Jiangui.

Massive vines burst from the soil, coiling around Chu Wanning's limbs and torso. Tianwen's own offshoots, already weakened by fire, were cut apart by yet more vines, which tugged Mo Ran out of his protective shelter.

"Stop!" Chu Wanning cried, frantic.

Ignoring him, Taxian-jun soared gracefully over to Mo Ran and looked coolly down at that face, identical to his own. His gaze drifted downward to fix upon Mo Ran's mangled chest.

"Tianwen—!" Chu Wanning roared.

But Tianwen and Jiangui were holy weapons of the same type. Without looking up, Taxian-jun lifted a hand to send Jiangui's fiery red tendrils to tangle with the recovered golden vine. Neither would easily gain the upper hand.

Chu Wanning's lips were ashen, and tendons protruded on his hands. He strained with all his might against Jiangui's confines. Taxian-jun shot him a glance, a complicated look in his eyes. His thin lips parted around a low sigh. "Chu Wanning. You really care so much for him."

He raised a hand and lunged for Mo Ran's chest. If only he could get that last scrap of spiritual core, he could return to an approximation of life. *He* was the real Emperor Taxian-jun, the real Mo Weiyu. He was the man who deserved to have all his heart's desires fulfilled after enduring a decade of loneliness.

He was the one who deserved to live.

But as his hand streaked toward Mo Ran's wound, a beam of gold light whizzed past and pierced clean through Taxian-jun's palm. Black blood dribbled out.

Taxian-jun stared at Tianwen's tendril, still boring through his hand, his face completely blank. What did he feel? Pain? Disappointment? Anger? He'd experienced such emotions so often, and with such intensity, that he had perhaps already grown numb to them.

At last, he slowly turned his head. He stared calmly at the man bound within Jiangui's coils, whose breath came in harsh pants, whose eyes were obstinate and unyielding. Taxian-jun barely seemed to register the blood running down his hand. He watched Chu

Wanning with that distant, inscrutable gaze, then laughed. “Chu Wanning.”

Silence.

“Why don’t you just cut out my heart?”

Chu Wanning was shaking. It was as though Jiangui had sprouted thousands of sharp thorns that were pricking every inch of his body. His swordlike brows drew together, phoenix eyes filled with pain beneath dark lashes.

Without looking away, Taxian-jun channeled spiritual energy into his palm and severed that willow vine. He was no longer so preoccupied with carving Mo Ran’s beating heart out of his chest. He walked toward Chu Wanning, each step deliberate. When he was close enough, he stroked Chu Wanning’s pale face with his bleeding hand.

“I asked you a question,” he said, his nonchalant tone belying his spiteful words: “If you’re so ruthless, why don’t you just cut out my heart?”

Chu Wanning glared at him in silence.

“In your eyes, what does this venerable one amount to?” Taxian-jun sighed softly and closed his eyes. Naturally, Chu Wanning didn’t answer him. Before Taxian-jun could continue, his eye caught the flickering red glow of a willow shoot curled around Chu Wanning. He froze, then muttered in realization, “Interrogation?”

Jiangui and Tianwen were the same. If Tianwen had the ability of interrogation, then Jiangui should be no different.

Taxian-jun’s purple-black eyes gleamed at the prospect of using Jiangui to pry the truth from Chu Wanning’s stubborn mouth. His lips parted eagerly, only to press together once more, as though he hadn’t decided what to ask. Only after a long beat did he begin haltingly, “Ahem… If… This venerable one wants to know, if—”

The question was mortifying, but given this heaven-sent opportunity, he’d regret it forever if he didn’t ask it. He hesitated for a long time before his features settled into a look of determination. Avoiding Chu Wanning’s eyes, he said slowly, “If, in the past life… If this venerable one had died earlier—died before you.”

Jiangui’s radiance grew, as if the vine was readying itself to squeeze the truth from the man within its coils.

Taxian-jun looked up. “Would you…still remember this venerable one?”

So strong was his yearning for the answer that Chu Wanning felt an agony like countless steel needles stabbing into his flesh, each

trying to tease out his true feelings. He trembled as a chill raked over his limbs, and his complexion turned wan.

Taxian-jun stared at him, unblinking, thin lips opening, his own thoughts weighing heavily on his heart. “Would you?”

“I…” The pain drilled into Chu Wanning’s marrow, about to shred through his organs. Every nerve in his body screaming, Chu Wanning looked up hazily at Taxian-jun. Through his watering eyes, that handsome face was so familiar, tinged with ardent longing, perhaps even deep sentiment. It so resembled the face from that moonlit night so long ago now, on that sword above the waves of Flying Flower Isle, when Mo Ran had taken his hand and said*, I like you. And you?*

Tears brimmed in Chu Wanning’s eyes. Consciousness flickering, he rasped, “That wouldn’t happen…”

Perhaps his voice was too quiet, or perhaps it was for another reason entirely that Taxian-jun leaned closer, his own face practically touching Chu Wanning’s sweat-drenched, pallid features.

“What wouldn’t happen?”

“That wouldn’t happen…” Chu Wanning lowered his lashes, warm wetness gathering beneath them. “I’d never…let you die before me…”

Taxian-jun froze.

“I’m sorry.” Chu Wanning’s voice was as hoarse and broken as a shattered xun. “I’m the one who didn’t protect you properly.”

Taxian-jun gaped at him as his already bloodless face paled further. He seemed to hear thunder rolling in his ears. A memory sprang unbidden to his mind: Beside Heavenly Lake, that man who’d crumpled in his arms had lifted his blood-streaked hand and gently prodded at his forehead.

That man had said, *It was I who wronged you. I won’t blame you, in life or in death.*

A violent ache tore through his heart, like something had ruptured within his chest. “Wanning…” He stood rooted to the spot, like a statue.

Taxian-jun reached out again, this time not out of malice. His hand seemed to move freely of the rest of him, drawn to that face so similar to the one he remembered from the past life.

Ice-cold, dyed red with blood.

In the distance, a shrill whistle sounded.

Taxian-jun's fingers froze a hairsbreadth from Chu Wanning's cheek. Those eyes that had held far too many emotions for a corpse went blank, as if his awareness had vanished with the call of the whistle. Taxian-jun let his arm fall. Slowly, he stepped backward, dismissing his weapons with a wave of his hand. The past life's Bugui and the present life's Jiangui both vanished.

Suddenly freed, Chu Wanning stumbled and fell onto the dirt. When he raised his head, he saw a man clad in robes of pure white standing at the edge of the forest, surrounded by falling bamboo leaves. His face was masked, and he held a jade flute in one hand. In the other was a blind man's cane. His figure seemed pure as a lotus as he waited for Taxian-jun to trudge over to him.

"You're…" Chu Wanning started.

"Take Mo-zongshi away." The man sighed quietly, his voice obviously distorted by a voice-changing spell. "I can't hold him for long—he'll recover his awareness at any moment."

When Chu Wanning remained frozen, the man urged, "Go. Tianyin Pavilion and Hua Binan will be here soon. If they catch you, you won't be able to change a thing."

Gritting his teeth, Chu Wanning climbed to his feet and hoisted Mo Ran over his shoulder. He drew out the Rising Dragon Talisman and ordered the great beast to take them away.

Just as the dragon raised its head to launch into the sky, Chu Wanning turned, taking one last glance at the man in the depths of the bamboo forest. To his surprise, he saw that the stranger was making his way forward by touch, his cane tapping against the ground. The sight tugged vaguely on a thread of memory, but he couldn't make the connection. "Thank you very much."

The man shook his head. "Go quickly."

The paper dragon, knowing Chu Wanning's personality too well, spoke up on his behalf. "Young man, you're very kind. My master would like to know your name—if you meet again in the future, he can thank you properly."

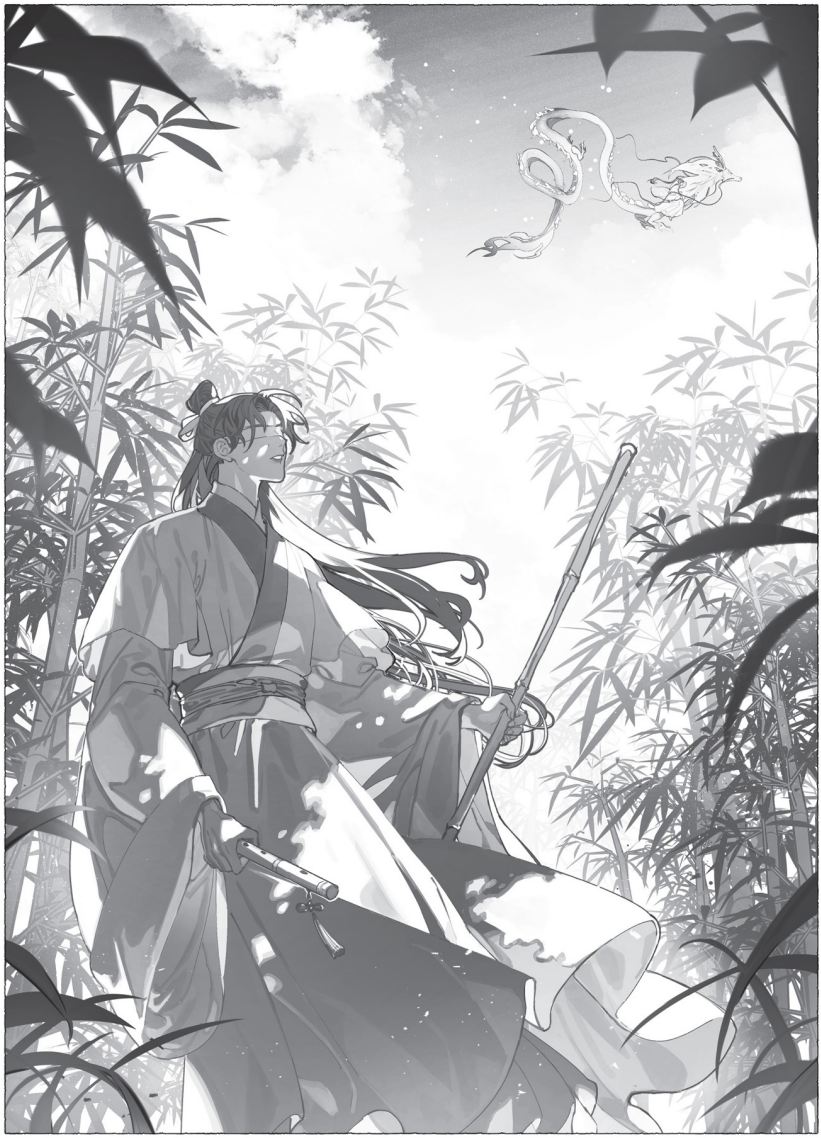
The man was silent a moment. "Me?" he said softly. Amidst the soft rustling of the forest, his voice sounded stark and somber. "I'm just a man who's finally free."

The paper dragon was unsatisfied, but Chu Wanning sensed this stranger wouldn't reveal his identity. He bowed to the man, then patted the dragon's neck. "Let's go."

The paper dragon obediently said no more. It leapt skyward,

soaring into the clouds and vanishing without a trace.

As the wind gusted through the bamboo, that masked, white-clad man stood calmly in place for several quiet minutes. He waited for the gale to die down, for his surroundings to become tranquil once more. Only then did he lift his face toward the heavens he would never again see, toward that figure he would never again look upon, and say quietly, “The disciple Shi Mei wishes Shizun well.”



Sunbeams scattered over his neat and clean robes.

“Shizun, the jianghu’s paths run far. May they grant you safe passage.”

Chapter 278:
Never Have I Failed You

BOTH THE UPPER and lower cultivation realms were abuzz with the shocking news: For the first time in history, a prisoner had been stolen from the sentencing grounds of the vaunted Tianyin Pavilion. Not only that, but the thief in question was the world's foremost zongshi, Chu Wanning. He'd killed eleven of Tianyin Pavilion's most skilled disciples and injured a hundred more before whisking the convicted criminal Mo Weiyu away to heaven knew where.

Some said Chu Wanning must've lost his mind, while others said he and Mo Weiyu were the same, both beasts in human clothing. Still others had a different take on the situation. Those who had been close to the action had witnessed several details that had them exclaiming in anger: Something about Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's relationship was fishy. There was definitely something going on between them, something too dirty to name.

Regardless of the fervor with which such gossip spread, Chu Wanning and Mo Weiyu did not show themselves in the jianghu. No one knew their whereabouts. The world's most upright zongshi had stolen the world's most sinister villain, and both had vanished without a trace.

Beyond the wooden frame of a half-open window, snow flurries drifted down. The ground beneath the window was green with moss and scattered with a few withered petals.

Four days had passed since the uproar at Tianyin Pavilion. The realm had been thrown into chaos, and everyone had made their own judgments. Only here, in this cabin nestled within the empty mountains, was there still some semblance of peace.

A man walked out of the quiet depths of the forest and into the vivid scene bracketed by the window frame. He held a large oilpaper umbrella aloft and carried an armful of firewood. Pushing open the door, he entered the cabin. The room was very cold. He piled the wood next to the hearth, then added smaller scraps of kindling to the stove. A feeble fire flickered to life.

This cabin, having been abandoned for quite some time, was in a state of disrepair. Although it was tidy enough, a musty smell hung in the air. The man retrieved a dew-laden branch of white wintersweet from his pile and placed it next to the bedframe.

Chu Wanning sat down, studying the figure on the narrow bed.

Four days had passed, but he had yet to wake.

Since escaping from Taxian-jun, Chu Wanning had drawn upon all his knowledge of techniques from the past lifetime and his still-bountiful spiritual energy from the present one to keep Mo Ran alive. Yet even after all this, Mo Ran was unconscious and frail, his spiritual core beyond repair.

"My shizun built this cabin on his travels. You can tell by the smell it's been a long time since anyone's lived here." Chu Wanning gazed intently down at Mo Ran's face. "I know you don't like incense, but at least you don't mind flowers. I picked a branch of wintersweet —it'll stay fresh for a long time."

Mo Ran lay unmoving, his lashes tight against pale cheeks. His sleeping form looked so tranquil, as if embodying the peace he'd so rarely known in life. He had spent the past few days sleeping soundly. After Chu Wanning finished attending to his requisite chores and tasks, he spent every spare moment at Mo Ran's bedside, speaking to him.

Whenever the two of them had been together in the past, Mo Ran had done most of the talking while Chu Wanning listened. How could he have known that, someday, they would switch roles like this?

"I've reinforced the barriers outside and set up wards. No one will find us here," said Chu Wanning. "I've brought back firewood and food too. We have nothing to worry about for the time being."

He paused, then heaved a sigh. "Oh you—why won't you wake up?" He reached out to brush his fingers over Mo Ran's hair.

The fire flickered gently. Chu Wanning sat by the bed as the shadows fanned across the floor with the shifting sun. No matter how long he waited, Mo Ran's eyes remained stubbornly closed.

Chu Wanning's lashes drifted shut, and he sighed softly. "You must still be tired, so go on and sleep, then… I'll pick up where I left off in the story I was telling you yesterday. Sorry—I know you like bedtime stories, but I don't know any. All I can tell you about are things from our past." Chu Wanning fell silent, looking down at his hands, before continuing softly, "Mn…where'd I stop yesterday? Let me think… That's right, I told you about how I discovered the gu flower in the past lifetime, how I wanted to pull it out of your heart. But the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows was already too deeply rooted; there was nothing I could do. In this lifetime I finally stopped the curse. I never thought things would end up like this."

He touched the back of Mo Ran's hand. It was freezing.

Chu Wanning spoke quietly to Mo Ran just like this, holding his

hand. Both because of outside schemes and their own innate personalities, there were too many sentiments they'd never expressed openly. They'd squandered so many chances, passing by each other like strangers. Chu Wanning regretted this deeply. How would things have changed if they'd spoken more honestly? Would everything be different? Would he have discovered the flower's curse earlier?

Would they have had a chance to start over again?

"Ever since you were reborn, you've wanted to repent." Chu Wanning closed his eyes and sighed. "But do you remember how the flower came to be planted in you in the first place?" His voice caught. "Think back… Mo Ran, try to remember…"

You've never owed me anything. Since the beginning, it was me who owed a debt to you.

I'm begging you, please wake up. If only you'd wake up, if only you'd recall those lost memories, then you'd know… The true story began on that rainy night, seven years ago, when I was meditating in seclusion.

The day Mo Ran had exchanged his fate for Chu Wanning's had been an ordinary one. That day, the Red Lotus Pavilion was buffeted by wind and rain, torrents crashing over the roof tiles beneath flashing lightning and booming thunder. But Chu Wanning couldn't hear any of it.

It had happened to be the year Chu Wanning needed to cultivate in seclusion to shore up his weakened spiritual core. Wanting his disciples to be at ease while they kept watch over him, he cast a silencing spell on himself before entering seclusion. Then he calmly sat down, cross-legged in the center of the pavilion, and cast his mind into nothingness. Because of this, he had not witnessed the violent struggle that had played out right in front of him.

On that day, amidst the howling wind, Mo Ran and Shi Mei had stared each other down within the Red Lotus Pavilion. Mo Ran's face had been pale as bone, while Shi Mei's expression was dark and sinister.

The truth Chu Wanning had never known had unfolded slowly as the rain poured around them.

Mo Ran had only recently become Chu Wanning's disciple when the time for his seclusion came around. Because of the punishment he'd received for accidentally plucking Madam Wang's prized haitang blossom, Mo Ran had felt wronged and embarrassed. He'd announced he wouldn't be able to look after his shizun properly, and so didn't wish to attend to him.

Of course, words said by a youth in a moment of anger were not to be taken seriously. After two nights had passed, Mo Ran still remembered Chu Wanning's kindness more than his own grudges. He pushed down the glumness in his heart and set out for the Red Lotus Pavilion, intending to take over the rest of Shi Mei's shift.

He couldn't have known then that he would stumble upon the plot that would upend his entire life—that he would find Shi Mei with a dagger in his hand, in the process of casting a curse on Chu Wanning.

Confusion, shock, fear, anger, and despair had crashed over Mo Ran. He sprinted forward and knocked the knife out of Shi Mei's hand. "What are you doing?!" he shouted, a yelp like a wild animal's.

Shi Mei's astonishment showed for the briefest moment. His gentle, bright peach-blossom eyes quickly narrowed.

"I was wondering who it could be." Shi Mei smiled. "With all the barriers surrounding the Red Lotus Pavilion these days, the only ones with access are us three disciples and the sect leader. It would have been tricky for me if the young master or the sect leader had come. Good thing it's only you."

Mo Ran was out of breath from running. He interposed himself between Shi Mei and Chu Wanning, shielding his shizun behind his scrawny figure as the night wind ruffled his robes and tangled in the stray hair framing his face. Glaring, he demanded, "What are you trying to do while Shizun's in seclusion? You… You…" At that time, Mo Ran could scarcely believe that his soft-spoken Mingjing-shixiong possessed a second face like a fiend's. "Who are you, really?!"

Shi Mei laughed out loud. "A-Ran, you're so cute. I'm your Mingjing-shixiong of course. Who else would I be?" He assessed Mo Ran as he stood before Chu Wanning. This new disciple was so slight, so overconfident in his strength. It was almost amusing. "Didn't you say Shizun's the worst and you never want to see him ever again?"

Confident in his plan, Shi Mei was in no hurry as he teased and mocked Mo Ran. "When I brought you those wontons, you told me you hate cruel people like Shizun. So why'd you change your mind just two days later and come running over here?"

"If I didn't, who knows what you'd've done today?!" Mo Ran was overcome with fury and grief. "Shi Mingjing, why did I think you were a good person?! I should've never trusted you!"

"Aiya, is it my fault you're so gullible?" Shi Mei asked amiably. "All it took was a bowl of wontons and a few pleasant words, and I had you wrapped around my little finger. You're hardly better than a

stray dog—if anyone tosses you a bone, you'll follow them home."

Mo Ran glared mutely at him.

"Why're you staring at me like that? Tell me, were the wontons good?"

Gripped by fear, Mo Ran watched Shi Mei, his dark eyes gleaming and cold in the night. After a long moment, his throat bobbed. "Shi Mingjing… Your heart is black."

Shi Mei's smile never wavered. "A black heart is one that's been bewitched and diseased. My heart's perfectly healthy—it's red, just like yours and Shizun's, for now."

He paused. With a flourish of his fair, slender fingers, an exquisite flower appeared at his fingertips. Its black petals, edged with gleaming silver, were tightly furled. Shi Mei brought the flower to his nose and took a deep whiff. Such a lovely flower in the hands of such a beautiful youth ought to have made for a charming sight. Yet the tableau was thoroughly spine-chilling.

"What are you planning to do…" Mo Ran mumbled.

Shi Mei looked up through his long lashes, his peach-blossom eyes filled with mirth. He seemed in an excellent mood. "Honestly, there's no point in explaining it to you. A simple spell is all I'll need to make you forget about everything that happened tonight. You won't remember a thing."

He held that black flower cupped in his elegant fingers.

"But since we're disciples under the same shizun, I suppose I'll tell you," said Shi Mei. "This flower bud was created by my mother. It's a Flower of Eightfold Sorrows that I've gone to great pains to nurture. Perhaps it's good you're here—if it vanished before anyone else got the chance to admire it, I'd feel like I was missing out on something."

"A Flower…of Eightfold Sorrows?"

"Shidi, there are eight sorrows in life from which regret springs eternal, even in death. The demon tribe left a seed upon this earth that ordinary humans would find impossible to cultivate. Its name is the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows." Shi Mei's voice was soft and refined. "In the early stages of its growth, this flower drinks human blood. But after it blooms, it needs to take root in someone's heart. Within that heart, it will absorb its host's goodness and kindness while fostering malice and hatred."

He stroked the flower's black petals tenderly as he spoke. "No matter how good someone is, as long as they harbor the slightest

dissatisfaction in their heart, the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows will magnify it. Bit by bit, they'll become a monster who'll kill without blinking an eye."

His irises gleamed like the iridescent scales of a snake. He turned those peach-blossom eyes on Chu Wanning, who sat cross-legged and silent, lost in his subconscious.

"You want to plant the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows in Shizun's heart?!" Mo Ran cried, aghast.

"Don't be so surprised," Shi Mei said blithely. "He's the most powerful zongshi in the world. If he turns into a cold-blooded killer, don't you think he'd be unstoppable?"

"Are you insane? How could you… How could you bear to…"

"Aren't *you* the one who called him cruel and unfeeling?" Shi Mei asked, unconcerned. "Once I make your words come true, Shidi, you can hate him wholeheartedly. Then wouldn't we both have cause to celebrate?"

Mo Ran felt like his head was on the verge of exploding, and he was shivering so hard his back was numb. "You're…you're crazy… I was just saying stuff because I was mad—I-I never really hated him! Put it down right now, don't do this—"

"Why not?" Shi Mei asked, intrigued.

Why not? Because Chu Wanning was so good. The table in the Red Lotus Pavilion was covered in his blueprints. His creations—whether automatons or weapons—never served his own interests. Rather, they all reflected his concern for the safety and well-being of others.

He was pure and clean, like the first snow that floated down from the early winter sky. Yes, he was exacting, and at times he could be unforgiving. But he had also taken Mo Ran's hand over and over again, teaching him how to read and write. He'd practiced martial arts with him from the light-filled day into the dark night.

He'd agreed to be his teacher. Henceforth, Mo Weiyu no longer remained a lonely, unwanted boy, who possessed only false happiness and family. He'd gained a real identity—he was Chu Wanning's disciple.

"You can't hurt him…" Distraught, Mo Ran desperately wanted to wake Chu Wanning, but he didn't know how. All he could do was stand his ground, arms spread wide to shield him. "He can't turn into a monster. He's so good. If you made him kill people…it would make him so sad."

He had no way to express the anguish that welled in his breast. He could only use the simplest and most straightforward words to plead, almost incoherently, with Shi Mei. He hadn't had the time to master any spiritual techniques that could help him now. He could only hide Chu Wanning behind his frail body.

To force a good person to kill was impossibly cruel. He had come to this visceral realization on his own as the House of Drunken Jade had gone up in flames around him.

Shi Mei eyed him, finding this boy endlessly amusing. "Sad? Once his heart has transformed, he won't be sad about it. A-Ran, there's no need for you to worry about that."

"But why do this?! Why hurt him?!"

Shi Mei didn't reply right away. Lashes lowered, he hesitated for a moment before saying lightly, "Because I have certain goals I must accomplish."

Mo Ran stared at him, uncomprehending.

"I need great power at my disposal." Shi Mei pressed his lips into a thin line. "You wouldn't understand."

Mo Ran seemed to be drawing on every ounce of his paltry strength to reason with this inscrutable shixiong before him. "You know what kind of person Shizun is. Even if…even if you do this, even if you take away all his goodness and turn him into a heartless monster, he won't listen to you. He wouldn't let you use him. You… you'll never succeed."

"Who are you to say I won't succeed?" Shi Mei chuckled. "Ah, I forgot this part—I fused a fragment of my soul into this Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. Once the flower blooms in his heart, he'll fall in love with me, and his love will never waver."

"You're mad!" Mo Ran exclaimed in horror.

Unruffled, Shi Mei closed the distance between them. Lightning ripped through the curtain of night, illuminating his devastatingly beautiful face. Rumbling thunder followed in its wake.

"But it's just like you said. He's so good—so why *can't* I use him, why can't he be mine? So what if he becomes a monster? When the time comes, my voice will be the only one he listens to, and he'll love me unconditionally. Won't that be perfect?"

He knew Chu Wanning wouldn't wake up; he'd never hear this conversation. He thus felt wholly at ease. "Shidi, step aside, won't you?" he said. "You only just managed to cultivate a spiritual core. Do you really think you're a match for me?"

“I’m not budging,” Mo Ran gritted out.

Shi Mei laughed. In the blink of an eye, he’d darted behind Mo Ran like a phantom. He raised a hand over Chu Wanning’s head, holding aloft that black flower on the cusp of blooming. “A-Ran, have you any idea how much of myself I’ve poured into this Flower of Eightfold Sorrows? I’ve toiled for so long, waiting for the day of Shizun’s seclusion.”

He bent down, his cheek almost brushing Chu Wanning’s temple. “I’m about to make him my lethal weapon, my puppet. I’m about to make him mine. What can you possibly do to stop me?”

Shi Mei lowered the flower, ready to seal Chu Wanning’s fate.

“Don’t touch him!” Mo Ran shouted, desperate, in one last-ditch attempt to obstruct him.

“That’s enough.” Shi Mei was finally losing his patience. “Do you have any idea—”

“Take me instead.”

The moment the words left Mo Ran’s lips, a bolt of lightning shattered the heavens, and a great thunderclap shook the pavilion.

Shi Mei narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Mo Ran was trembling from head to toe. Having joined the sect so recently, he’d learned pitifully few spiritual techniques. There was nothing he could do to stop Shi Mei, and he had no idea how to rouse Chu Wanning. He was utterly powerless, with nothing to fall back on. All he had was his own flesh and blood.

So he could only say: “Take me instead.”

Shi Mei went silent, then snorted. “Do you even know what you’re saying?”

“I do.”

“This Flower of Eightfold Sorrows is the product of my mother’s blood, sweat, and tears. I shattered my own soul to raise it.” Shi Mei straightened up, staring unblinkingly at Mo Ran. “And you think *you’re* worthy of receiving it?”

“I…” Mo Ran balled his hands into fists. After a long beat, his face jerked up. “I might not be worthy. But I’m a much better option than Shizun.”

The light in Shi Mei’s eyes seemed to ripple. “How so?”

“You said this flower will magnify the hatred in someone’s heart. But what if that person’s heart is clean and pure—what if they don’t have any grudges?”

Shi Mei thought for a moment, then laughed. “Impossible. Everyone holds some resentment in their heart. Even the Beidou Immortal is no different.” But the movements of his fingertips grew ever so slightly fretful as they caressed the petals of the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows.

There was some merit to Mo Ran’s words. Shi Mei, too, had wondered whether Chu Wanning would be a suitable host for the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. What if there really was no hatred in his heart? He couldn’t afford the time and energy required to cultivate a second flower, to say nothing of the agony of splitting his soul. He didn’t want to experience that a second time.

At his hesitation, Mo Ran took a step forward. “In all the years you’ve known him, have you ever seen Shizun hate anyone?”

When Shi Mei still didn’t answer, Mo Ran pressed on. “You said the flower will devour all the goodness and warmth in someone’s heart… Any ordinary person’s heart would contain other things too, but you should know better than me what Shizun’s heart is like.”

The rain fell harder, drumming against the leaves in the forest.

“Shi Mingjing, aren’t you worried that if he loses every happy memory—if he forgets everything good in his life—someone might find out?”

Shi Mei’s eyes narrowed dangerously, his pupils flickering as though a snake slithered through their depths.

Mo Ran took another tentative step toward him, then another. His heart was pounding like a drum, faster than the patter of the raindrops. “I don’t know what your goal is. But if you have to sacrifice someone, take me instead.”

“You…”

“There’s hatred in my heart. The flower can magnify it. I don’t have many happy memories—even if I gradually forget them, it’ll be hard for anyone to notice.”

Mo Ran used all his powers of persuasion to convince the executioner to press the blade to his own throat. “I hardly know anything yet, but Shizun and Uncle both say I’m talented, that I have lots of spiritual energy… I can do it.” He was shivering, his nails biting into his palms, but he forced himself to keep speaking. “I can take his place and become the powerful weapon you want. I can become the cold-blooded killer you need.”

He came to a stop right in front of Shi Mingjing. “Shi Mei.” Lightning danced across the sky, and a sharp wind rose. The rain

slanted down, pouring into the pavilion in freezing gusts. “Take me instead.”

Perhaps Mo Ran’s argument was truly compelling, or perhaps Shi Mei was still too uncertain whether the flower would have the desired effect on Chu Wanning. Or maybe it was because Mo Ran had already demonstrated astonishing reserves of spiritual power. He’d managed to form a spiritual core even faster than the darling of the heavens, Xue Meng—fast enough to make anyone green with envy. Whatever it was, after some consideration, Shi Mei planted that budding black flower into Mo Ran’s heart.

When the deed was done, he took a seat by the stone table, resting his chin in his hand with a faraway look. He didn’t understand why. Why would Mo Ran choose to bear such devastation in Chu Wanning’s stead? He would give up his life, his souls, his future, and his dignity. The two of them shared little connection—they’d been master and disciple for less than a year.

Shi Mei couldn’t comprehend it.

He watched the black pistil vanish into Mo Ran’s chest. Those petals were velvety soft, yet they pierced his flesh like steel barbs, sinking into the depths of his heart. Mo Ran endured the pain in silence throughout. It wasn’t until the pistil dove into his heart like the feeler of some bizarre insect that he whimpered and fell to his knees.

Shi Mei sat quietly, his jade-like hands luminous, looking impassively down from above as Mo Ran convulsed and vomited blood at his feet.

“Does it hurt?”

Hoarse coughing was his only answer.

Shi Mei appeared intrigued. He asked, eyes placid, “How much? It’s my first time using this kind of curse. I’m really curious…what does it feel like to have the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows pierce your heart, my dear shidi?”

His gaze was like a springtime stream flowing over Mo Ran’s earthbound form, inch by inch, to finally fix upon his bone-pale fingers. Mo Ran’s fingertips, scrabbling unconsciously against the floor, had been rubbed raw, leaving streaks of blood behind.

“Does it hurt more than having your heart carved out?”

Mo Ran didn’t answer. It did hurt, terribly, but…the pain was nothing compared to his anguish in that mass grave in Linyi.

It was nothing compared to seeing his mother die before his

eyes.

It was nothing compared to scooping up the dirt with his own hands and scattering it over her corpse.

"Back then…I couldn't protect my mom. Now at least…I can protect my shifu," he murmured, eyes going glassy.

Already, his brightest memories were fading; the pure and carefree parts of his past were slipping away. Images from those good times, painfully few to begin with, flashed before his eyes—

A stranger giving him and his mother a bowl of hot soup.

On a snowy night, an old farmer allowing them to shelter inside and rest by the fire.

Another beggar child offering him half the meat pie he'd foraged.

Duan Yihan holding his hand as they walked along a canal in the autumn, dragonflies zipping past…

Those memories held no hatred, no suffering, no unhappiness, anxiety, or resentment. Everything was peaceful; they were wholly pure and good.

He saw himself embroidering a haitang handkerchief by the small glow of a candle. He saw himself sitting at a stone table, chin in hand, grinning as he watched his shizun eat a mooncake. He saw himself taking a sip of wine with Chu Wanning beneath the moon after gifting him that first jug of pear-blossom white.

Now he'd forget all of these memories. Never again would he be able to recall them.

Now his hatred would multiply. Those bygone moments of gentleness would be distorted beyond recognition.

Now the earnest passion in his heart would be extinguished, never again to burn with that clean flame. The spring waters in his eyes would freeze over, solidifying into ice.

Now he would defy his mother's dying wish. Duan Yihan had said, *Repay kindness. Do not seek revenge.* But he'd never manage it.

Though he didn't know where he got the strength, he gritted his teeth against the gut-wrenching agony and tried to clamber to his feet. But he swayed and stumbled, unable to stay upright; he collapsed back down to his knees and crawled. By the end, the pain was soul-crushing, yet he dragged himself forward until he reached Chu Wanning.

"Shizun…"

He put up a mighty struggle, squirming bizarrely on the ground.

At first, Shi Mei thought Mo Ran would try to interfere somehow. But the youth only summoned all his remaining determination, using up the last of his sincerity and gratitude, to prostrate himself in a long bow, forehead pressed to the ground.

Eyes welling with tears, Mo Ran said, “Shizun, very soon…I’ll disappoint you…”

Outside, rain sluiced down in the dark night.

“Very soon, I won’t remember your goodness anymore. I won’t… won’t be able to properly learn techniques from you anymore… You’ll get annoyed with me, you’ll be disgusted by me…”

He was crying as made his confession in these last moments before his rationality faded. But Chu Wanning couldn’t hear him, though Mo Ran was right there in front of him. He couldn’t hear a thing.

“I’m sorry. I picked that haitang flower because I wanted to give it to you. Shizun, I came here today because…I wanted to tell you sorry when you woke up. I wanted to tell you…what I really think.”

His voice was mangled, every word bloodily gouged from his throat.

“Shizun, thank you for not looking down on me, for being willing to take me as your disciple… I really, really…”

His heart throbbed, and his field of vision filled with scarlet. The Flower of Eightfold Sorrows was beginning to put out roots, and its affection spell was starting to take hold. Mo Ran kowtowed, grinding his forehead into the ground, weeping uncontrollably. “I really like you so much.”

Shi Mei let out a soft sigh, eyes shining with interest, yet also with pity. But these emotions, whether cruel or kind, were all perfunctory, unable to touch his heart.

At last, he walked over to Mo Ran and knelt, lifting the young man’s cheek from the ground. Gazing unblinkingly into Mo Ran’s increasingly hazy eyes, he asked softly, “Tell me, Shidi, what do you want now?”

“I want…”

What did he want?

The autumn colors in Linyi, the scenery before the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

Duan Yihan smiling, Chu Wanning casting his gaze downward.

In the entertainment house, Xun Fengruo’s sharp canines peeked

out as she grinned. Eyes shining with candid anticipation, she said, “A-Ran, I’ve nearly saved enough to buy my freedom. I’ll take you with me—we’ll leave this place behind. Jiejie will bring you to live the good life.”

Even in his confusion, Mo Ran was doing his utmost to cling to these memories that were floating away like duckweed.

“I want to…repay kindness…not seek revenge.”

Shi Mei shook his head. It was some time before he asked again, “What do you want?”

Mo Ran rasped out, surprisingly resolute: “I want…someday…to die by Shizun’s hand.”

Shi Mei froze, then started to laugh. “To die by Shizun’s hand?”

“I don’t want to become a monster… I don’t want to go to hell…” Mo Ran’s mumbling was disjointed. “I don’t want to only remember hatred, Shizun…”

He threw off Shi Mei’s hand and prostrated himself in front of Chu Wanning once more. His eyes were scarlet, his awareness fading fast. “Kill me,” he said, voice climbing to a wail.

By the end, this was the only wish he repeated over and over.

“On the first day I commit evil…please, I want you…to kill me.”

Within the vast night, the pelting rain swallowed up the youth's feral cries. As the thunderstorm raged and the bamboo forest whispered, all of the blooming lotuses within the Red Lotus Pavilion shed their petals, their colors sinking beneath the water.

In life there were eight sorrows, and in death there was everlasting regret.

Before Mo Ran lost consciousness, he grasped the hem of Chu Wanning's robes with a tremoring hand. Gazing upward, he muttered, "Shizun…please, pay attention to me… Could you…pay attention to me…"

Pay attention to me.

How much suffering and remorse in this world was drowned out by such fierce storms?

After Chu Wanning had learned of the truth two lifetimes later, he'd thought back on those days. He could still vaguely remember the next morning, when he'd awoken from his meditation cycle.

Golden light had streamed into the bamboo pavilion. The haitang blossoms in the trees and red lotuses in the pond had all lost their petals. The splendid blossoms that had flourished just days before would soon return to dust.

The rain had stopped overnight. Chu Wanning blinked, then turned to see Shi Mei brewing tea by the stone table. Behind the soft spirals of steam, Shi Mei's lovely face was endlessly gentle. Seeing Chu Wanning awake, Shi Mei smiled. "Shizun."

"Why aren't you resting? You've been here for three days—fetch Mo Ran to relieve you."

The amber tea streamed into the cup like preoccupations filling a heart to the brim. Shi Mei held out the tea to Chu Wanning. "I'll keep watch over Shizun today too," he said with a smile. "A-Ran is still a child at heart. He hasn't gotten over Shizun's punishment."

Chu Wanning paused, taken aback. "He's not coming?"

Shi Mei lowered his gaze, his eyes veiled by two pairs of dense, dark lashes, like tender flower pistils in early spring. "Mn," he affirmed. "He's not coming. He went to the library to help the sect leader organize some books."

Chu Wanning was thrown for a moment, distracted and crestfallen. He had been planning to use this time to talk with Mo Ran one-on-one about the flower-plucking incident. Honestly, he'd been too harsh with Mo Ran that day. It had been his first time dealing with a disciple breaking the rules. When he thought about it in

retrospect, he felt his punishment had been much too severe. Now Mo Ran wasn't even willing to see him, much less stay by his side during his seclusion.

He closed his eyes.

"Shizun, have some tea."

After a long moment, he accepted the fragrant cup from Shi Mei's pale and slender hands. Steam curled up from the surface as he blew on it, then took a sip. The cup was so full that a drop splashed out and landed on his robes.

Shi Mei, sharp-eyed and attentive, smiled when he noticed. "I have a handkerchief."

"No need, I have my own." Chu Wanning fished out a white handkerchief embroidered with a haitang blossom, glancing down to dab at the tea.

"What a beautiful handkerchief. They look like the best ones you can get in town," Shi Mei said warmly. "Shizun, did you buy it yourself?"

For an instant, Chu Wanning wished to say: *No, Mo Ran gave it to me. He embroidered it as a gift for his new teacher.* But his gloomy mood quashed the urge before the words were out. Besides, saying it aloud seemed somehow embarrassing. After a beat of silence, Chu Wanning merely made a low grunt of assent as he folded up the handkerchief and tucked it back into his robes. Once the handkerchief was out of sight, he sighed quietly.

The morning sun was brilliant. The only remnants of the bitter wind and rain from the night before were the fallen red petals on the railings and the fresh droplets on the lotus leaves.

"Did it rain a lot last night?"

Shi Mei's fingers stilled for a moment where he was tidying the tea ware. His eyes darkened minutely. "Hm?"

Chu Wanning gazed out at the sparkling pond. "All the flowers have lost their petals."

Breaking into a smile, Shi Mei carefully finished arranging the cups, then said easily, "There was a thunderstorm last night. It was frightfully loud for a while, then it passed. Today looks to be a fine day. Once the ground dries, I'll sweep up the petals in the yard."

Chu Wanning said no more.

The blue of morning sky was as vivid and deep as the richest brocade. The edges of the horizon looked like they'd been rinsed

clean. As the sun climbed higher, it seemed to be rising on wings of gold.

Truly, it was an uncommonly beautiful day.

Chapter 279:
I Surrender My Life to a Snowy Night

DEEP IN Nanping Valley, in the middle of the night, fresh snow fell quietly outside a small cabin.

Mo Ran's condition had only worsened over the last few days. Even when Chu Wanning had used the Flower Spirit Sacrifice technique to treat his wound, it showed little improvement.

At some point that afternoon, Mo Ran had woken from his heavy slumber, but his awareness was hazy. When he saw Chu Wanning through half-lidded eyes, he began to cry. He said he was sorry, then begged Chu Wanning not to go, repeating the same plea over and over until he was sobbing too hard to speak.

When he slept again, he dreamed, flitting through those tumultuous years of his life. He dreamed of when Xue Zhengyong had first found him, and when he'd lost Chu Wanning for those five long years. The only memories that never appeared in his dreams were those stolen by the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows. He couldn't dream of his sacrifice, his act of protection, or his innocence—all of it was out of reach.

"Mo Ran…" Chu Wanning brought a bowl of freshly cooked congee to his bedside. He'd made it using the skills he'd recalled from the past life. Though it wasn't especially good, it was edible at the very least.

Chu Wanning sat down next to the bed and laid a hand on Mo Ran's forehead—he was burning up. Chu Wanning called his name, trying to rouse him, waiting and waiting as the congee became lukewarm, then cold.

This wouldn't do, Chu Wanning thought; he set the congee in a pot of water to keep it warm. He didn't know when Mo Ran would wake, but whenever he did, he'd be able to eat something right away.

"I made it with chicken stock, the way you like it," Chu Wanning said softly.

He'd been channeling spiritual energy into Mo Ran's heart without cease to keep it beating, but Mo Ran still wouldn't wake. If he couldn't even remain conscious like this, then if that spiritual energy was cut off, he might never open his eyes again. He'd be beyond saving.

Chu Wanning couldn't accept that—how could he possibly

accept it? Mo Ran was still alive; he was still breathing, no matter how shallowly. From dawn till dusk, Chu Wanning waited by his side. As he watched his chest rising and falling, he felt there was still hope. Everything could still return to normal.

They still had time.

One night, Mo Ran had blearily stirred, waking to a darkened room. Mo Ran stared blankly at the unlit candle, his parched lips opening and closing around words Chu Wanning couldn't make out.

At this, Chu Wanning became frantic. He grabbed Mo Ran's hand and asked, "What are you trying to say?"

"Light…"

"What?"

"Light… I want a light…" Mo Ran's eyes fixed upon the candle he was powerless to set aflame as tears rolled down his cheeks. "I want there to be light…"

For a moment, time folded back on itself. Not long after he'd first become Chu Wanning's disciple, Mo Ran had fallen ill. His slight form had lain curled up in his bed, muzzy and dazed. When Chu Wanning had come to check on him, Mo Ran had whimpered for his mother. Chu Wanning had taken a seat by the bed and, unsure how to comfort him, hesitantly reached out to touch Mo Ran's burning forehead.

That scrawny boy had cried and said, "It's dark… Everything's so dark… Mom… I want to go home…"

On that night, Chu Wanning had been the one to light the candle. The bright flame threw the room into sharp relief and illuminated Chu Wanning's face. As though roused by the candle's small warmth, the feverish boy's eyes had opened, revealing a pair of dark, misty irises. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning had nodded and tucked the blankets more securely around him. "Mo Ran, I've lit the candle." His low, measured voice had soothed his disciple. "Don't be afraid."

Years later, a lonely candle flared to life once more. The run-down cabin was saturated with its warm light, which chased away the cold and the boundless dark.

Chu Wanning smoothed a lock of hair behind Mo Ran's ear. "Mo Ran, I've lit the candle," he said hoarsely.

He wanted to continue—to say, *Don't be afraid.* But the words caught in his throat; he couldn't speak them aloud. He blinked back his tears, yet as he leaned forward to press his forehead to Mo Ran's,

the sob escaped him. “I’ve lit the candle, so please wake up, okay? Pay attention to me, okay…”

The flame flickered like a fretful dream, weeping its waxen tears. The candle burned, bright and clear, until it finally burned itself out.

Later, the sky began to brighten, and the horizon paled outside the window, like the white belly of a fish. Mo Ran’s eyes had not opened again. Those days of his youth, when a single candle could rouse him from his slumber, were gone, never to return.

Three more nights passed this way. Chu Wanning spent each day at Mo Ran’s bedside, looking after him and keeping him company. He poured spiritual energy into him, and spoke to him of the things he’d forgotten.

On this night, the snow had stopped by sunset. The sun was a red disk outside the window, its dying light spilling over the land. A squirrel leapt from the snow-covered branches, rustling the white pear tree and filling the air with sparkling iridescence. The generous light of the setting sun shone onto the man on the bed, its rosy glow imparting a semblance of life to his wan cheeks. Beneath delicate lids, his pupils shifted. In the last moments before twilight descended, he slowly opened his eyes.

After so many days unconscious in the throes of illness, Mo Ran was awake at last.

His eyes roved the room, confused and vacant—until he caught sight of Chu Wanning, slumped over at his bedside in an exhausted doze. Startled, Mo Ran mumbled hoarsely, “Shizun…”

As he lay beneath the blankets, his mind slowly cleared. A vague recollection of the things Chu Wanning had told him again and again as he’d drifted between waking and sleep slowly took shape in his mind.

A cup of wine at the Mid-Autumn Festival, a haitang-embroidered handkerchief…and the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows that he’d taken in Chu Wanning’s stead in the Red Lotus Pavilion.

Was he dreaming?

Maybe he wished too fervently for salvation, so he’d dreamed of Chu Wanning telling him those tales. Maybe he wished too passionately to turn back, so he’d dreamed that Chu Wanning forgave him.

He turned his face and raised a hand, wanting to touch that man fast asleep at his side. But he pulled his hand back before his fingers made contact. If he touched him, he worried this dream might fall

apart.

He was still at Tianyin Pavilion; he was still kneeling on the Platform of Repentance, a raucous sea of people below him. He knelt alone in front of those multitudes, and all their faces became blurry, became the faces of all those who'd died by his hand, shrieking and cackling and demanding his life.

No one wanted him; no one would save him. He was too shameless, too ambitious, too insane. He'd hallucinated that Chu Wanning had come. In the agony of having his heart carved out, he'd dreamed that he saw the last bright flame of his life.

This was all fake. No one had cut his chains, no one had taken him in their arms, no one had flown to him on the wind, no one had brought him home.

His lashes trembled. He stared at Chu Wanning's sleeping visage, eyes brimming with tears. He didn't dare blink, willing his eyes to stay open until his vision blurred, until his tears finally fell. Chu Wanning's silhouette shattered into a thousand motes of light. Panicked, he blinked, and looked at that wonderful dream again.

The dream was still there.

Mo Ran lay back wearily, lashes wet, throat stinging, tears trickling from the corners of his eyes. His chest hurt terribly, and he could feel blood oozing from the wound. He didn't want to wake Chu Wanning from his hard-earned slumber, so he bit his lip and wept in silence.

He had awoken, but he had no illusions about the state his body was in. This was temporary—a flash of lucidity before the end.

This was also the last bit of mercy the heavens were bestowing upon him. He, Mo Weiyu, had lived almost all of his days under a cloud of anxiety, and had lost his mind for an entire lifetime. His hands were laved in blood, and his name was synonymous with evil, though he hadn't been convicted of his crimes until the very end.

This turn of events bewildered him, made him apprehensive. Was he lucky or unlucky? He'd spent two lifetimes consumed by hardship and absurdity—that was unlucky. But what remained of his days could be peaceful—that was lucky.

Yet how many days would he have? One? Maybe two? Whatever it was, they'd be happy days he'd paid for with his life—the kind of peace he'd never known.

When he heard Chu Wanning stirring, he hastily wiped his tears —he didn't want his shizun to see that he'd been crying. Mo Ran

turned to gaze at the man beside the bed, watching as his lashes quivered, as his phoenix eyes fluttered open, and as his gaze fixed upon him.

Outside the window, the crimson sun slipped below the horizon, and the northern dipper rose.

Chu Wanning whispered, “Mo…Ran?”

His voice was low and mellifluous, like a seedling pushing through rich soil, or a frozen stream cracking in the spring. It was like wine on a little clay stove brought to a simmer for the third time, soft tendrils of steam curling up to warm one’s heart. It was the most wonderful, unforgettable sound in the world. Mo Ran stilled for a moment, then smiled. “Shizun, I’m awake.”

The evening was clear, without wind or snow. The rest of his life stretched out before him, as far as the eye could see.

Tonight, nestled in the valley of Nanping Mountain, the easiest and kindest period of Mo Ran’s two lifetimes had arrived. Now that he was awake, he could see the joy and sorrow on Chu Wanning’s face. Now that he was awake, he sat up and leaned back against the wall. He’d do whatever Chu Wanning told him; he’d listen to whatever Chu Wanning wanted to say about their experiences and misunderstandings. To him, nothing was important anymore. He simply wanted to hold onto this a little longer—just a little bit longer.

“Let me look at the wound again.”

“No looking.” Grinning, Mo Ran caught Chu Wanning’s hand in his own and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it. “I’m fine.”

After insisting a few more times only to be rebuffed, realization seemed to dawn on Chu Wanning. He stared at Mo Ran, the color gradually draining from his face.

Forcing himself to stay calm, Mo Ran said gently, “I’m fine, really.”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply. After a moment, he rose and walked over to the stove. The fire had nearly burned out. All Mo Ran could see of Chu Wanning was his back as he worked slowly at the hearth.

The fire flared back to life, flooding the cabin with light and heat. Chu Wanning didn’t turn; he continued poking at the firewood with the tongs long past the point of necessity.

“The congee…” Chu Wanning rasped at last. “I kept the congee warm so you could have some when you woke up.”

Mo Ran was silent for a beat, then looked down and laughed. “It’s been so long since I’ve had Wanning’s congee. After you left in

the past life, I never got to taste it again."

"I didn't do a good job," said Chu Wanning. "I still don't know how to make it. It's…probably edible, but barely…" The last syllable seemed to waver, as though he might not be able to continue. After a long pause, he said slowly, "I'll get you a bowl."

"Okay."

The room was very warm. As the sky darkened, snow flurries drifted down in fits and starts. Mo Ran held the bowl of congee in both hands. After every few cautious sips, he looked up at Chu Wanning. Then he dipped his head for a few more before sneaking another glance.

"What's wrong?" Chu Wanning asked. "Is something bothering you?"

"No," Mo Ran said quietly. "I just want to…look at you some more."

Chu Wanning didn't say anything. He took the fish that had been roasting over the fire and cut into it with a silver dagger. It was a freshwater fish, meltingly tender, but it still contained bones. Chu Wanning carefully picked every one of them out and divided the meat into small pieces.

Mo Ran used to fuss over him whenever they ate together. Now it was his turn to return the favor. He passed the neatly filleted fish to Mo Ran. "Eat while it's hot."

Mo Ran ate obediently.

When this man was sitting up in bed, cocooned in blankets, he didn't look so tall and strong. In the orange glow of the firelight, his face looked very young. It suddenly occurred to Chu Wanning that Mo Ran—whether as Taxian-jun or as Mo-zongshi—was a full decade younger than him. Yet he'd experienced so much suffering.

Mo Ran finished all the congee, but he left the most tender piece of fish untouched. As he was about to offer it to Chu Wanning, he froze. "Shizun, are you all right?"

Chu Wanning ducked his head, his eyes burning. He took a moment to master himself before replying flatly, "It's nothing. Just caught a bit of a chill."

Afraid he would lose his composure entirely if he sat any longer, he surged to his feet. "I'm going to check on things outside. You should rest when you're done eating. Once your wounds heal, I'll take you back to Sisheng Peak."

Both of them knew his apparent improvement was a temporary

respite—that all this warmth would soon fade. But still they spoke of tomorrow; they spoke of the future. As though they wished to take all the decades to come and cram them into one evening, to live through every great turn of the stars across the sky in one single snowy night.

After Chu Wanning left, Mo Ran rose and took a seat in front of the fire. Eventually, he loosened his collar and looked down at the fearsome hole in his chest. Then he stared off into space, feeling empty.

The cottony snow fell faster as night settled over Nanping Mountain. Mo Ran didn't know when his condition would deteriorate, and his life would reach its appointed end. He leaned against the mattress, watching the snow drift down, his ears filled with the whistling of the wind. His life seemed just like that wind, sweeping the past away in its wake.

In both his previous and present lifetimes, some clever mind had always been plotting in the background, planning their next move. Though one had wished to protect him while the other had wished to destroy him, both his shizun and Shi Mei had pursued their own agendas. Though neither ultimately succeeded for reasons beyond their control, both had acted with intention.

Mo Ran wasn't like them. He was just a dog—and a dead stupid one at that. He had no mind for strategy and no clue how to play a beautiful game of chess. He only knew how to faithfully guard his beloved. Even if his skin was flayed open and stripped down to bone, he would stubbornly stand his ground in front of this man, refusing to leave.

Kindly, one could say he was brave.

Bluntly, he was dumb.

This dumb dog of a man propped his elbows on the windowsill, lashes trembling. His eyes snagged on a familiar figure beneath a flowering plum tree in the distance. Chu Wanning hadn't been checking the surroundings at all. It had only been an excuse.

The tree was far away and the snow was heavy; Mo Ran couldn't see his face. He could only make out a hazy outline, alone and unmoving within the vast snowstorm.

What was he thinking about? Was he cold? He…

"Shizun."

Lost in his thoughts amidst the snow, Chu Wanning turned around. Against the backdrop of black sky and swirling white snow, he saw a young man in dark robes with a blanket over his head. At

some point unbeknownst to Chu Wanning, he must've walked up behind him.

"Why are you out here like this?" Chu Wanning blurted in alarm. "What are you doing? Go back in—"

Before he could finish, Chu Wanning found himself engulfed in heat. Mo Ran had lifted the blanket over both their heads, pulling Chu Wanning into the shelter of its darkness and warmth.

They stood under the old plum tree beneath the heavy blanket, musty from years of disuse. No matter how fast the snow fell or how hard the wind blew, it had nothing to do with them. In the soft darkness, Mo Ran folded Chu Wanning into his arms. "Don't worry. Even though I can't remember all the things Shizun told me about, if…" He hesitated. He kissed Chu Wanning's brow, then said quietly, "If I had to do it all over again, I'd choose the exact same thing."

Faced with Chu Wanning's silence, Mo Ran felt around for his ice-cold hand. "Besides, Shizun, you shouldn't feel bad. What Shi Mei said makes a lot of sense. The Flower of Eightfold Sorrows only took impulses I already had—the thoughts I could never say out loud—and encouraged me to act on them. That's all."

Mo Ran interlaced their fingers and pressed their foreheads together. “My heart was always full of resentment; it’s just that I couldn’t do anything about it when I was little. Slaughtering all of Rufeng Sect… I’d thought about it before. Same with ruling the world. It sounds silly, but when I was five or six, hiding in that grubby little shed, I used to imagine that someday, I’d hold the world in the palm of my hand, with armies at my beck and call. These were all my own ideas; no one forced them on me.”

He touched Chu Wanning’s face. “Even if Shizun had received the flower instead, you wouldn’t have become an evil tyrant like me. You wouldn’t have been exploited, and you would’ve never been punished by Tianyin Pavilion.” Mo Ran laughed, soft and husky. Soothingly, he rubbed his forehead against Chu Wanning’s. “I didn’t take your place. There’s no point thinking about these what-ifs—let’s go inside and sleep.”

They returned to the cabin, and Mo Ran held him on the narrow bed. That inevitable moment loomed closer, impossible to avoid. Mo Ran’s awareness had begun to fray, and the ache in his heart grew increasingly unbearable. These final moments of lucidity wouldn’t last long. It had been like this, too, when his mother had died—he knew he didn’t have much time.

He lowered his dense lashes. The fire in the stove no longer blazed as intensely as before. In its faded yellow light, his youthful, handsome face looked surpassingly gentle. This stupid man had glimpsed the grief in Chu Wanning’s eyes. He pushed down his own discomfort and grinned. “Does it look good?”

Chu Wanning blinked, caught off guard. “What?”

“The scar,” said Mo Ran. “A man doesn’t have any personality without some scars.”

Chu Wanning was silent for a beat. Then he lifted his hand and slapped Mo Ran across the face—but the slap had no power behind it, softening almost instantly into a caress. The last of Chu Wanning’s composure seemed to crumble. He buried his face in Mo Ran’s warm chest. Though he didn’t make a sound, his shoulders shook.

Chu Wanning knew the truth all too well.

Mo Ran first froze, then put an arm around him. He kissed his temple and his hair. “Must be ugly.” After all he’d been through, Mo Ran was more tender than ever. He sighed softly. “Ugly enough to make Wanning cry?”

It would be one thing if he called him *Shizun*. But when he said *Wanning*, those two lifetimes wove together. Within the blankets, Chu

Wanning embraced Mo Ran, embraced this body that was blazing with life. He'd always disliked voicing strong emotions; he found it too embarrassing. But now, he felt how ridiculous his stiff bashfulness had been, how absurd. As their limbs entwined beneath the blankets on their tiny bed, within this spare, empty cabin in the whirling snowstorm, Chu Wanning said softly, "How could it be ugly? It doesn't matter whether you have any scars. You'll always be very handsome."

Mo Ran blinked. He'd never heard Chu Wanning express himself so directly, not even when they'd confessed their feelings atop his sword.

The room was lit only by the fire's dying embers. Their light was mellow—a gentleness and peace arriving in the twilight hours of his life.

"In the past lifetime—in this lifetime—I've always loved you. I've always wanted to be with you. And in the future too."

Mo Ran listened as Chu Wanning spoke in his arms. He couldn't see his face, but he could imagine how he must look. The rims of his eyes were most likely red, and the tips of his ears too.

"In the past, I knew you'd been cursed, but I couldn't show it; I had to hate you… Now, I can finally make it up to you." Chu Wanning's cheeks were burning, and his eyes were wet. "I love you. I'd tie my hair with yours; I'd split my souls for you; I'd surrender myself to you."

At hearing Chu Wanning express his willingness to surrender, Mo Ran's heart burned like it had been singed with fire. A shudder ran through him. He was both stricken and sorrowful, pained and deeply moved. "Shizun…" he murmured, voice faltering.

Chu Wanning raised a hand. "Let me finish."

A long moment passed. Chu Wanning was still terrible at expressing his love in words. He thought of many things, but nothing seemed right; nothing seemed enough. He really wanted to say, *I'm sorry for letting you suffer. Your burdens were too heavy.* He wanted to say, *In the past life, I was never able to tell you the truth. I'm the one who let you down.* And also, *Thank you for protecting me at the Red Lotus Pavilion all those years ago.* He had half a mind to cast all his dignity aside to sob at Mo Ran, to embrace his still-warm body and say, *Please don't go, please don't leave me.*

But there was a lump in his throat, and an acrid bitterness in his heart.

At last, Chu Wanning lowered his head and kissed the wound on Mo Ran's chest. Lashes quivering, voice hoarse, he said, "Mo Ran, it

doesn't matter what happened in the past, or what will happen in the future. No matter what, I'll always be with you." All the blood in his body seemed to boil with embarrassment, but his words were ever so somber. "All this time, I've belonged to Taxian-jun, and I've belonged to Mo-zongshi."

It was too hot. Mo Ran felt like a flame from another world had ignited in his chest. Fireworks seemed to explode before his eyes, and all his pain and grief to instantly recede.

"For two lifetimes, I've been yours. No regrets."

Mo Ran closed his eyes, his tears spilling over his lashes. At last, he kissed Chu Wanning on the lips. "Shizun…" He sighed. "Thank you."

The snow came down faster, and the night grew darker. They held each other, ready to sleep, both thinking—*so this is the rest of our lives.* Mo Ran could feel that the front of his robes was soaked with tears, but he didn't mention it. Since he was little, he'd always hoped the last chapter of his life would be full of happiness. It was supposed to be a time of cheer, he'd thought.

Settling Chu Wanning in his arms, he said, "Go to sleep, Wanning. Go ahead—I'll hold you. You don't like the cold, so I'll keep you warm. Once I'm better, we'll go back to Sisheng Peak. I want to apologize properly to Auntie and Uncle. I want to squabble with Xue Meng again… There are so many things we still have to do…"

Mo Ran stroked Chu Wanning's hair, his voice very soft. He tasted iron at the back of his throat, and his breaths were becoming slow and labored. But he was still smiling, his expression still tranquil. "Shizun, I'll hold an umbrella over you for a lifetime."

Chu Wanning was too choked up to speak.

"Xia-shidi…" Even though he could barely get the words out, Mo Ran was still teasing him. "Shige…has a story for you… Every night from now on, I'll tell you a story… Don't get mad at me for being bad with words. 'Ox Eats Grass' is still the only one I know…"

Mo Ran looked up, gazing at the crystalline mantle of snow on the window. The whole world was an expanse of pristine white.

"Wanning." Mo Ran's heartbeat echoed in Chu Wanning's ears as he lay in his embrace. "I love you, always and forever," he murmured.

Gradually, his eyes drifted shut, his dimples like two shallow pools of pear-blossom white. His heart slowed, bit by bit, its beat unsteady.

Outside the window, a bough from the plum tree snapped,

weighed down by too much snow. The branch fell in a flurry of white, emitting a crisp *crack*.

When the noise settled, Chu Wanning could no longer hear Mo Ran's heartbeat. He waited, the moment stretching on and on. But there was nothing.

No sound. Nothing at all. It was bone-chillingly quiet, a dreadful silence.

It was done—finished—over. The room was terrifyingly still.

A long time passed, but Chu Wanning did not move. He was still lying in the bed, still in Mo Ran's embrace. He didn't get up, raise his head, or say anything more.

His little disciple, his Mo-shixiong, his Taxian-jun wanted him to sleep well. He said he was going to hold an umbrella over him for a lifetime, tell him a bedtime story every night, love him for the rest of his life. Mo Ran had said, *It's cold outside; it's snowing hard. I'll keep you warm.*

So Chu Wanning curled up in his arms, against that chest where warmth still lingered. He didn't move a muscle. Tomorrow, they would set out for home. He and Mo Ran needed to get a proper night's rest.

He wrapped an arm around Mo Ran's waist. "Okay, I'll listen to you—I'll sleep," he said into the darkness. "But…tomorrow, when I call your name, you'd better wake up."

He pressed his cheek to the chest that would never again rise or fall, his hot tears soaking into Mo Ran's robes. "Don't laze around in bed."

Goodnight, Mo Ran. The night is long, but I'll stay with you. May you have sweet dreams, with fire and light—and a home.

Chapter 280:
Disputes of Good and Evil

THE NEXT MORNING, sunlight scattered into the room through the window.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes. It was cozy under the covers; one person's heat was enough to keep two bodies warm. He gazed calmly at Mo Ran's face. In his eyes, this was the best and most handsome man in the world.

He didn't move. *What kind of congee should I make today?* he wondered. Yesterday's congee was gone. Mo Ran had devoured four bowls like a hungry ghost, leaving nothing behind. He kissed Mo Ran on the cheek. "I'll make you some more, okay?"

The man beside him seemed to be very soundly asleep. His pitch-dark lashes fanned over his cheek, soft as cattails. Perhaps they'd flutter open in the next instant, and Mo Ran would pull him over with a grin. "This venerable one's hungry," he'd say. "Wanning, go make me a bowl of congee."

Or perhaps he'd murmur to Chu Wanning, tender and besotted, "I love all Shizun's cooking. Whatever you make is the best."

But his body was cold. When Chu Wanning kissed his cheek, there was no warmth beneath his lips.

Chu Wanning didn't cry.

He got out of bed and smoothed the blankets over Mo Ran. Then he went out into the yard to get more firewood and lit the stove. Dutifully, he prepared and cooked the congee. The water reached a boil, sending up a great cloud of steam. The rice burbled and danced, tiny bubbles darting upward. He skimmed off the foam with a spoon and added salt, then covered the pot with a wooden lid to let it simmer.

Chu Wanning stood before the stove, his mind a vast blank. In one fleeting moment of clarity, it occurred to him that a person who'd already been reborn couldn't be brought back to life a second time using the Rebirth technique. That single thought was nearly enough to break him. He hastily willed his fingers to stop trembling, then reached up to take the lid off the pot.

If he made congee, it would definitely be eaten. He had all those fragments of Mo Ran's memories. Mo Ran had been penniless in his childhood. He'd never had enough to eat; a single steaming pancake

was enough to make his day. Mo Ran wouldn't let congee go to waste. He'd wake up.

The congee was soon ready. Chu Wanning went out to the yard to sweep away some of the snow, then broke off another branch of wintersweet. Once inside, he trimmed its end and placed it in a small pot of dirt. The fragrance of the blossoms carried for miles. This way, the smell of the mortal realm could accompany Mo Ran on his journey.

No—he was getting confused again. What journey, what smell of the mortal realm? Mo Ran was lying here, perfectly fine, the same as yesterday and the day before and the day before that. It was only that his face was a little gaunter today, his complexion a shade paler.

But he would still wake up.

Over two lifetimes, from the moment they'd met, Mo Ran had never left him of his own accord, no matter if they'd been loathing and spiteful, or loving and compassionate. Mo Ran had gradually permeated his life, becoming the wind, the passing hours, the water flowing through his fingers, the veil of light on his hair. He was his sun and moon, his dawn and dusk; he was his world entire.

Chu Wanning was still slowly making his way through this world. Here, the snow would still fall, and the cicadas would still sing. The lotuses would die in the autumn, and the flowers would flourish in the summer. Everything would remain as it was, so how could Mo Ran possibly leave? Chu Wanning would watch over him, stay with him, each and every day, waiting for him to wake.

As fate would have it—just as Mo Ran had once linked Chu Wanning's body to his own in the past life—in this lifetime, Chu Wanning would follow in Taxian-jun's footsteps.

Back then, Mo Ran had stood in the Red Lotus Pavilion, clad head to toe in black. "Only on the day I die are you allowed to leave this world," he'd said to Chu Wanning in his everlasting slumber. "Stay with me."

Now, deep in Nanping Valley, the figure of Chu Wanning in his white robes seemed to meld with the figure of that bygone emperor. He reached out, touching Mo Ran's bloodless face. "Stay with me."

With a flash of golden light, his spiritual energy flowed into Mo Ran's body. No matter what transpired in heaven or hell or the mortal realm, as long as Chu Wanning yet remained upon this earth, Mo Weiyu's body would not decay. He would only truly perish if, many years from now, Chu Wanning passed away, and that supply of spiritual energy was snuffed out.

Then they would turn to dust, to ash, scattering on the wind and vanishing into the dirt.[2]

They would leave together.

Within the temple of Tianyin Pavilion, the fires blazed, casting sinuous shadows over the walls. Mu Yanli stood alone in the middle of the hall, eyes closed, hand clasped behind her back.

The doors opened, and a figure strode into the hall.

Mu Yanli didn't turn. "You're here?" she asked, affectless.

"I am." The newcomer lowered his hood to reveal a face of such beauty it could topple nations—Shi Mei. "Mu-jiejie, would you like to take a look at the rear hall?"

"There's not much to see," said Mu Yanli. "You're just cutting someone open and peeling them apart. It stinks of blood; I can't stand it."

"I'm afraid there's no way around that. All part of the medicine master's vocation," Shi Mei replied with a smile. "The room wouldn't smell like fresh flowers even if Guyueye's Jiang Xi were wielding the knife."

Mu Yanli knit her brows. She had no desire to talk more of surgeries and the like, and instead asked, "Be that as it may, you've been working on the spell for several days now. When is Taxian-jun going to be fully reborn?"

"He won't quite be *reborn*—he only has a cognizance soul. He'll still be a revenant at best."

Mu Yanli's lovely eyes narrowed and flicked to the side. "A revenant is all we need. The more obedient, the better." She paused. "What about those spiritual core fragments? Were they of any use?"

"They were—though incomplete, they're still extremely powerful," Shi Mei replied. "Mo Ran's talent for cultivation is truly unsurpassed. He can clear the way for us."

Mu Yanli sighed. "There'll be no mishaps this time I hope."

"It's too early to say," said Shi Mei. "I'm in the middle of repairing the spiritual core in Taxian-jun's body. It'll take another ten days at least. During this time, I was hoping that Mu-jiejie could do two things for me."

"Go on."

"First, as soon as Taxian-jun recovers, we'll complete the major undertaking we discussed. No matter how stupid these cultivators are,

they'll eventually realize everything Mo Ran said was true. They'll probably band together to try and stop us." Shi Mei hesitated. "They're largely incompetent, but it'll become a headache if there are enough of them."

"And so?"

"The upper cultivation realm has plenty of firepower, but they lack experience. Sisheng Peak will be the key. I hope Mu-jiejie will sow a few rumors to drive a wedge between Sisheng Peak and the other sects. We'll bring Sisheng Peak down first."

"Chu Wanning abducted a prisoner, and Mo Weiyu escaped," said Mu Yanli. "Both of them are from Sisheng Peak, so it won't be hard to stir public sentiment against them. They've already become the target of criticism—many were calling for the sect to be dissolved. This is a simple matter. What's the second thing?"

"Second." Shi Mei heaved a sigh, almost rueful. "There's a man I'd like you to kill for me."

"Who?"

"Myself."

Mu Yanli whipped around to stare at him. Shi Mei's gentle features were bright in the firelight. "The version of you from this world?"

"Mn."

"Are you mad? How can you ask this? No matter what, he's still…"

She fell silent. Shi Mei had raised his feathery lashes to reveal the dark eyes beneath, seething with murderous intent.

"He's still me?" Shi Mei laughed. "You're not wrong. But he's a traitor."

Mu Yanli said nothing.

"If he hadn't set Chu Wanning free, would anyone have stolen Mo Ran from Tianyin Pavilion?" When Mu Yanli still didn't answer, he continued. "If he hadn't interfered with Taxian-jun, would Chu Wanning have been able to abscond with Mo Ran while he was half-dead?" His eyes glinted, cold and forbidding. "How lucky he learned some techniques behind my back. He covered his tracks pretty well for a blind man. He fled so fast he didn't leave me a chance to hack him to pieces."

"I know it was wrong of him," Mu Yanli said, unable to remain silent any longer. "But he's still a member of our clan."

“He and I are the same person. When these two worlds become one, one of me will be enough.” Shi Mei ascended the steps and came to stand next to Mu Yanli. “Your other self died of an illness in the past lifetime. But having this world’s Mu-jiejie helping me is just as good.”

“But it’s not as if you have no choice but to kill him. Our people have suffered enough.” Mu Yanli stared at Shi Mei, fretful. “A-Nan, we made a promise. If someone is of our clan, we have to work together and help them. We can’t sink to killing our own.”

Shi Mei shifted his gaze to the leaping flames. After a long silence, he replied, “When we were on Mount Jiao, I thought the same. I’ve doubted plenty of people, but I never doubted him. Yet that only gave him an opportunity to turn against me. We two aren’t the same anymore,” Shi Mei said calmly. “I’m still Hua Binan and Shi Mingjing.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “But what about him? He only remembers that he’s Shi Mingjing. He’s forgotten Hua Binan.”

The fire sputtered, orange sparks spraying into the air.

Mu Yanli shook her head. “I can’t do what you ask. He’s already lost his eyes for our sake. We won’t take him in again, but Chu Wanning and the others won’t accept him either—he has nowhere to go; his hands are tied. Why are you in such a rush to get rid of him? Because he betrayed you? Or because he chose a different path from you in the end?”

Shi Mei didn’t answer right away. After a moment, he smiled. “You’ve always been ruthless and decisive. Why’ve you suddenly gone soft?”

Mu Yanli’s head jerked up, her eyes glittering with pain. “Because he’s also my little brother. He’s also you.”

This flash of human emotion seemed to thaw the ice in her eyes, suddenly less cold and stony than before. “A-Nan, it doesn’t matter if it’s the past or present lifetime, it doesn’t matter how you might change. I couldn’t possibly turn against you. I can’t do it.”

The flames shimmered in the brazier, dancing upward like streamers of red silk. Shi Mei sighed again. “Forget it. This is a personal matter anyway. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll let it go. But the first task is of utmost importance. I ask Mu-jiejie to tend to it diligently.”

Mu Yanli closed her eyes.

The evening bell began to toll, its sober peals echoing from the top of the pavilion. The bell had hung there since the founding of Tianyin Pavilion thousands of years ago, and its sound was as majestic

as ever. Amidst its lingering tones, Mu Yanli said slowly, “I understand. Don’t worry.”

The night after the conversation in Tianyin Pavilion, several people were murdered in quick succession at Bitan Manor in the upper cultivation realm. Before the case could be investigated, Huohuang Pavilion, Wubei Temple, and Guyueye were similarly struck. An isolated act of terror quickly became a widespread phenomenon.

Soon, everyone realized what connected these crimes: Zhenlong chess pieces. There were chess pieces everywhere—in small villages and towns, in big cities and great sects. No place seemed to be excepted. These mindless pawns grew more and more numerous, killing people and torching buildings everywhere. All the cultivation realm’s sects had their hands full, and none had energy to spare for the commoners. Day after day, the rivers ran red with blood, and cities turned to ghost towns. The scale of the destruction far exceeded that of any Heavenly Rift.

No one was sure who was behind the violence, or how to bring an end to the massacres. A great many cultivators suspected that Chu Wanning and Mo Ran, whose whereabouts were unknown, must somehow be the perpetrators of these acts of terror. Others, however, remained doubtful.

A group of refugees gathered in an abandoned temple discussed the matter among themselves.

One remarked, “I have no problem believing Mo Ran’s behind all this trouble. But why would Chu Wanning help him?”

“Who knows? Maybe he wants a piece of the pie.”

“I doubt it’s that simple,” someone else piped up. “You all saw what happened at the sentencing grounds—would those two have been so distraught if they were just an ordinary master and disciple? If you ask me, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran’s relationship is far from normal.”

“Ah… What do you mean?”

“I mean they’re cut-sleeves. That teacher is definitely sleeping with his student.”

The words that passed their lips were unsparingly slanderous and obscene. Astonishment and revulsion appeared on the faces of the whole group. “Surely not?” someone muttered. “He’s the Beidou Immortal…”

“Don’t forget—when Chu Wanning died after repairing that

Heavenly Rift, wasn't Mo Ran the one who made the dangerous journey into the underworld to save him? Everyone says they have a deep master-disciple bond, but he could have died doing that! If it were you, would *you* be willing to do it?"

Everyone fell silent. One of the bean pods roasting over the fire burst, emitting a sharp *pop*.

"And there was that time on Mount Jiao—did you hear about that? Before Shi Mingjing was abducted, there was something he said."

"What did he say?"

"I can't remember the exact words. It was a tense situation; most of us didn't think much of it at the time. But looking back, it seemed like he was implying something."

Someone countered with a scowl, "But I heard Shi Mingjing is actually Hua Binan—can we trust anything he said?"

"Bullshit!"

Everyone jumped at this angry shout. They turned to see a man with eyes bulging in fury. "Don't tell me you actually believe that! Mo Ran was clearly just trying to drag Shi Mingjing's name through the mud!"

"Li-xiong, why are you so worked up about this…"

"How could I not be?" the man retorted. "Shi Mingjing saved my life!"

"Ah…"

"I was at Mount Jiao too, you know! Hua Binan used gu insects on us called heart-tunnelers. If it weren't for Shi Mingjing undoing the spell with optomancy, I would've died up there! If my savior was actually Hua Binan, why would he go to the trouble of lifting our curses?"

The burly man grew increasingly agitated as he spoke, until his eyes were damp with tears. "He saved us, but what did that get him? Hua Binan blinded him; he could be dead for all we know, yet he's still getting slandered by Mo Ran. I… I'm outraged on his behalf!"

The man broke down into raucous sobs. The others in the temple didn't know what to do. They all exchanged glances.

On one side was Shi Mingjing and Tianyin Pavilion; on the other, Mo Weiyu and Chu Wanning. Both had cause for others to doubt them, but the second was far more suspicious.

A lady cultivator gazing into the spitting flames was next to

speak up quietly. “Actually…I was part of the group that confronted Xu Shuanglin at Mount Jiao too. I saw how both Shi Mingjing and Mo Ran acted that day. In my eyes, neither seem like bad people.”

“But surely, between the two of them, one of them must be lying.”

The lady cultivator shook her head. “It’s not for me to say who’s lying—I don’t want to make false accusations. But I will mention something I saw with my own eyes.”

All eyes in the temple turned to her in curiosity. Slightly embarrassed, she cleared her throat. “At the time, everyone was injured, and Mo Ran and Chu-zong… Chu Wanning weren’t in great shape either. They were sitting off to the side, resting. I happened to glance over when Mo Ran sneakily reached out…and touched Chu Wanning’s face.”

Chapter 281:
I Wish to Do More Good

"AH..."

Many of the older members of the group couldn't bear the thought of any whiff of impropriety between a student and teacher. They covered their mouths with their sleeves and scowled.

"What a travesty!"

The lady cultivator cupped her tea in her hands and spoke without raising her head. "At the time it surprised me; I found it bizarre. But both of them were such well-known zongshi. I didn't dare presume anything untoward was going on between them. In hindsight though, there really was something off."

She paused before continuing. "And someone already mentioned the other thing—what Shi Mei said before he was taken away. His words were vague; I only thought they were a little strange and didn't dwell on it. But thinking back on it now, he probably meant Mo Ran once had feelings for him, but later, Mo Ran had a change of heart and fell in love with Chu Wanning."

Everyone fell silent. Many details they'd overlooked before suddenly stood out starkly.

"Were you all there when Mo Ran was taken from Tianyin Pavilion?" someone said softly. "When Chu Wanning was holding him, I think I saw him kiss him on the forehead."

The more scandalous the detail, the more curious people were about it. "Ah!" someone else exclaimed. "Wait, who kissed who?"

Scratching his head, the first speaker answered, "Chu Wanning kissed Mo Ran."

Silence.

"None of you saw it?"

One by one, the others shook their heads. The speaker threw up his hands. "Fine, pretend I didn't say anything. Maybe I was just seeing things."

But *pretend I didn't say anything* was a useless admonition, having the same effect as *I'm not sure if I should be telling you this*—once the words were out in the world, could they really be taken back? The cultivators' scorn compounded. If a master and disciple were romantically involved, it might be slightly more tolerable if the

disciple had been the one to take the lead. If the master was the instigator, such an affair was grossly taboo. It would be natural to conclude that the teacher in question had the worst kind of intentions, and no honor to speak of.

These sorts of private debates and conjectures weren't limited to this abandoned temple. As the two foremost suspects behind the recent turmoil, the subject of Mo Ran and Chu Wanning quickly became a hot topic of conversation across the land. As the saying went, bad news traveled a thousand miles before good news made it out the door. Talk of a pious student and a kind teacher was the sort of thing to put people to sleep, but rumors of an illicit affair between a disciple and his master? *That* would draw all the eyes around the dinner table to the loudmouth in their midst. Although there were many who doubted the rumors and plenty who didn't approve of such talk, this salacious piece of gossip spread far and wide.

In no time, all sorts of speculations arose. Some said Mo Ran had slept his way to the top, that Xue Meng and Chu Wanning were also involved, that Shi Mei and Chu Wanning had probably done it too, and so on and so forth, until the originally pristine Beidou Immortal became a dirty old man who lived to take advantage of the handsome youngsters under his tutelage.

It had always been the case that the court of public opinion could bury the truth, and that the tongue was often sharper than the sword.

"Just look at his disciples—aren't all three of them way too handsome? I can't think of a single innocent reason for it."

"When Mo Ran first joined the sect, Chu Wanning didn't want to take him as his disciple, right? My friend in Sisheng Peak told me after Mo Ran spent the night in the Red Lotus Pavilion, Chu Wanning changed his mind. Why? Well now we know! Clearly Mo Ran was just that good in bed."

Each titillating detail made listeners itch to jump in with their own opinions.

"Hadn't Mo Ran just barely come of age at that point? Chu Wanning really has no scruples, huh."

"Now I understand why that girl was beaten half to death for peeping at him in the bath back then. She probably saw something she wasn't supposed to!"

After a few suggestive moments of silence, a local ruffian chimed in with a roguish grin. "Hey, I just want to know what you guys think—when they're in bed together, who's on top, and who's on the

bottom?"

"I think Mo Ran's gotta be on the bottom. Everyone knows Chu Wanning's temper. That man's so arrogant—he'd never ask his disciple to fuck him."

"When you put it like that, you have to feel a bit sorry for Mo Ran. Forced into bed with a disagreeable hard-ass who's so much older than him, and not even *that* attractive—I bet it makes his skin crawl."

"Ah…"

But another kind of chatter traveled even faster. As the days wore on, several Zhenlong chess pieces began to be identified. All of them were disciples from Sisheng Peak.

A mere one or two clues could be chalked up to coincidence. But every single piece of evidence now pointed squarely to Sisheng Peak. No matter how unimpeachable its reputation had once been, the sect inevitably became the target of public condemnation. Panic ensued.

Over several days, people came to Sisheng Peak in an attempt to get answers, but all were turned away at the gates. "Xue-zhangmen isn't here. Come back in a few days if it's important."

"Where is Xue Zhengyong?"

Hearing the visitor use the sect leader's given name with such impunity, the little disciple at the gate lost his temper. "Since the moment the trouble began, my sect leader's been running around day and night, doing everything in his power to subdue those pawns! Wherever people are suffering, that's where he is—find him yourself!"

The visitor, who'd only come to pick a fight, sneered. "Subduing pawns? Looks to me like he's busy controlling them—he and those vermin Mo Ran and Chu Wanning are all in this together."

"Don't be absurd!"

"Absurd?" said the visitor. "Mo Ran cultivated forbidden techniques, and Chu Wanning stole him from Tianyin Pavilion. Before that, Xue Zhengyong was begging them to let Mo Ran off, and Zhenlong pawns made out of Sisheng Peak disciples have been popping up everywhere. Only an idiot would believe your sect is blameless!"

Later, Xue Zhengyong listened to reports of these errant troublemakers with a weary sigh. "Those who are truly innocent don't need to defend themselves. Considering the state of things, it'll be a blessing just to finish the work that's been cut out for me. Don't pay them any mind—just send them away."

Yet on this day, more people had come to the gates than usual. This time they'd brought several bodies with them, demanding Sisheng Peak pay the price for their deaths.

It was late at night by the time Xue Zhengyong returned home, covered in blood and injuries. He listened to Madam Wang's tale while washing the dirt from his face, then took a deep breath, pondering in silence.

"We can't let things go on like this," said Madam Wang. "I wonder if we should go to Tianyin Pavilion and ask for assistance…"

"Ask Tianyin Pavilion?" Xue Zhengyong narrowed his eyes in scorn. A long scratch ran down his cheek, the work of an undead corpse. "There's something shady about Tianyin Pavilion. That Mu Yanli stands there like an empty-headed Buddha sculpture—good for absolutely nothing!"

Madam Wang clapped her hand over his mouth. "Don't say things like that."

Xue Zhengyong blinked at her.

"I know you're upset." Madam Wang sighed, moving her hand to his cheek. "But what can we do? They're the descendants of heaven, an ancient order established by the gods—they've always been mighty. Even during the crisis of King Ping three hundred years ago, no one dared to question them. What power do you have to change this?"

Xue Zhengyong's eyes flashed with anger. He looked as if he had something to say but was biting it back. In the end, he tossed away the towel he was using to clean his wounds and walked over to the window, where he stood with his hands folded behind him, gazing at the sickle moon outside.

At long last, he spoke in a hoarse voice. "Do you think Ran-er is doing okay?"

Gathering her long skirts, Madam Wang came to stand beside him. "Husband…"

Moonlight spilled over Xue Zhengyong's face. He seemed so weary, even aged, without his usual smile. "Even though he's not my brother's real son, even though he killed my nephew, all these years… You know what I mean? All these years, I thought of him as… I…"

"I know. You don't have to say any more—I know." Madam Wang's eyes stung too. "I feel the same."

Xue Zhengyong buried his face in his hands, scrubbing mournfully. Suddenly, he doubled over and began coughing as if he couldn't stop. When he finally brought his hand away from his mouth, it was red with blood.

Madam Wang looked at him in horror. "How did you get hurt so badly? Quick, lie down and let me take a look."

"There's not much to see." Xue Zhengyong wiped the blood from his lips with a handkerchief. "Just a minor internal injury. I'll be fine in a few days."

"Don't leave the house tomorrow. Look at all the other sect leaders—which of them insists on doing everything themselves?"

Xue Zhengyong's face twisted in an attempt at a smile, but he was so exhausted it sagged again after only a second. "We still don't know where Ran-er and Yuheng are, and there's been trouble all over the cultivation realm. Nine people died just at the foot of the mountain the other day, in Wuchang Town. You want to keep me home *now*, of all times?"

Madam Wang gazed at him with those beautiful eyes. Xue Zhengyong patted her head. "You know me. There's no way I can stay cooped up here."

"But surely you should take a day off at least." Madam Wang bit her lip. "You've just coughed up blood—you can't ignore this injury. Have you forgotten how your brother met his end?"

The last, valiant hint of a smile vanished from Xue Zhengyong's face. He glimpsed a faint, liquid glimmer beneath Madam Wang's

lowered lashes, and his heart twinged. “Don’t…don’t cry… You know me, I’ll be right as rain in no time. Ah, all right, I’ll stay in the sect tomorrow. I won’t go anywhere, okay? I’ll rest a whole day before I leave again—how about that?”

“I won’t force you,” Madam Wang said, voice thick with tears. “I can’t make you listen to me anyway. You can go wherever you’d like.”

“How could I?” Xue Zhengyong forced out a bitter laugh. “There now, don’t worry. Look, how many years has it been—haven’t I weathered all these storms just fine? Trust me, I’ll be good as new, I just need a little time.”

Xue Zhengyong was true to his word: He didn’t leave the gates the next day. But neither did he remain idle. He went to the library to think, considering their present predicament from every angle.

“Sect Leader, the young master has prepared some medicine for you. Drink it while it’s hot.”

“You can put it down here, thanks,” Xue Zhengyong said absently. He was deep in thought and not in the mood to get up and leave. He worked well into the afternoon. Only when his injured ribs began to ache did he remember to slowly drink the medicine, which had long gone cold.

As he left the library, Xue Zhengyong turned to the disciple guarding the door, “Where are my wifey and Xue Meng?”

“The young master just returned from the foot of the mountain. The madam is lighting incense and praying at the temple. Shall I call them over?”

Xue Zhengyong had wanted to rest a moment and talk with them. But before he could reply, the world spun around him. He really was getting old—he couldn’t recover from an injury with just a good night’s sleep like he had in his twenties. Even he had no choice but to submit to time’s passage.

“That’s all right, don’t bother them.” Xue Zhengyong managed a smile through the ache. “I’ll go sit in the meditation room for a while. Come get me if anything comes up.”

“Yes, Sect Leader.”

Xue Zhengyong clapped the disciple on the shoulder. His mood was bleak; he’d seen far too much strife lately. Looking at this little disciple before him, he couldn’t help an internal sigh—how precious were these flourishing days of youth. In his mind, there was no higher goal than bettering the days of these youngsters.

“All right, I’m off. Would you mind organizing the books I—”

Before he could complete the request, another disciple rushed into the library. The instant they caught sight of Xue Zhengyong, they knelt, looking deeply stricken. “Sect Leader! Something’s wrong!” the messenger cried.

The commotion made Xue Zhengyong’s ribs ache even more. *Damn it, I should’ve really let Tanlang treat this sooner.* His face paled slightly, but he pushed through the pain and asked, “What’s all this about?”

“All the sects of the upper cultivation realm have arrived in front of Loyalty Hall,” the anxious disciple replied. “Including their leader, Guyueye.”

Xue Zhengyong’s heart hammered in his chest. Though he had an inkling what this was about, still he muttered, “What could they all be doing here?”

“They said there’s too much evidence implicating Sisheng Peak. They can’t stand by and watch any longer, so they came personally to ask the sect leader for an explanation.” The disciple was growing increasingly agitated, on the verge of tears. “Sect Leader, they all came together. I’m afraid they want to disband the sect.”

Xue Zhengyong’s face went ashen. Clenching his jaw, he tapped the acupoints on his ribs. “They wouldn’t know the truth if it hit them in the face. What a bunch of bullies.”

He turned to the disciple watching over the library. “Don’t tell my wife about this just yet. I don’t want to worry her.”

“Yes, Sect Leader.”

Xue Zhengyong helped the trembling messenger disciple up from the floor. His voice was grave. “Come with me to the front hall.”

Chapter 282:
A Lone Wolf Backed into a Corner

XUE ZHENGYONG stood with the Sisheng Peak disciples and elders inside Loyalty Hall, eyeing their unwelcome visitors.

It seemed the great sects had reached a consensus: Even Jiang Xi, arguably more reasonable than the rest, stood among their ranks. The prospect of challenging another sect brought him no joy, but given his position as leader of the sects, he had little choice. This matter was too grave, and too much evidence had emerged against Sisheng Peak over the past few days.

On the other side of the hall, the Sisheng Peak disciples were none too happy themselves. They'd been run ragged over the last week putting out fires, only to now face accusations that they'd been concealing malicious intentions all along. It didn't help that the upper cultivation realm had come charging in with fiery accusations, prepared to doubt their every word. As the conversation continued, the atmosphere grew thick with tension.

"Let me repeat myself," said Xue Zhengyong. "Sisheng Peak did not knowingly give Mo Ran any forbidden technique scrolls, nor encourage his pursuit of the forbidden techniques, nor secretly practice the Zhenlong Chess Formation. And we sure as hell weren't trying to use those techniques to take over the cultivation realm. Yuheng and Mo Ran aren't even here right now. Please be reasonable."

Out of all the sects of the upper cultivation realm, Bitan Manor and Jiangdong Hall had the deepest grudges against Sisheng Peak. The hundred or so members of Jiangdong Hall that remained after the fiasco on Mount Jiao had publicly renounced Huang Xiaoyue, but deep down, their allegiances had never left their sect leader. They exchanged darting glances, and one person sneered, "Easy for you to say, Xue-zhangmen. You claim Sisheng Peak's innocence, yet the pile of evidence against you grows by the day. Appearances can be deceiving. Who knows what you guys are really up to?"

"That's right."

"All the Zhenlong chess pieces that have been caught wreaking havoc in the cultivation realm have turned out to be people from Sisheng Peak. Coincidence? I think not."

"You know what I find strange?" a Bitan Manor member chimed in. "Sisheng Peak has gone on countless exorcism missions in the

lower cultivation realm over the past two decades, fighting to secure the most arduous and tedious jobs and rarely demanding payment. Once or twice, sure—I'd buy that they're doing it out of altruism. But for twenty years? Isn't that kind of absurd?"

"My brother and I built this sect from the ground up to help the common people in the lower cultivation realm!" Xue Zhengyong snapped. "My conscience is clear; I've always lived by my principles."

"Your principles?" The Bitan Manor member sneered. "Xue Zhengyong and his principles produced a disciple who practices the forbidden techniques and a zongshi who murdered innocent men and women to free him. Xue-zhangmen, both these evildoers came from Sisheng Peak, yet you have the gall to speak of your principles?"

"That's right," someone agreed, scoffing. "What a pretty speech by Xue Zhengyong. 'Help the common people'? There's no one on earth who would do good deeds without any expectation of reward for twenty whole years. He's got to have some ulterior motive!"

"And then there's the matter of that huge wave of unidentifiable pawns that appeared out of nowhere. They couldn't have been made overnight. Who knows, perhaps when Sisheng Peak was going around performing exorcisms and such over these past few years, they were secretly amassing an army of pawns…"

Xue Meng, listening in, had had enough with this last slanderous statement. He shot to his feet and unsheathed his blade, sending his cup clattering to the floor. "Are you done running your bloody mouths?"

His words were met with silence. He raked his eyes over the assembly, gaze murderous. "Spreading rumors amongst yourselves is one thing, but to bring this dog shit here to Sisheng Peak? You've got some fucking nerve!"

Jiangdong Hall was a sect on its last legs, and the recent loss of so many of its senior members had left its newly elected leader at something of a loss. This new leader was a maiden no older than seventeen, with nothing going for her besides her good looks; she'd relied on the affections of her shixiong to raise her to her current position. The young lady was not only ignorant of etiquette, but also shallow and immature, and presumed everyone she met was as susceptible to her coquetry as her own unfortunate sectmates.

"Ziming-gege, don't be mad," she said, smiling coyly. When Xue Meng didn't reply, she continued, "It spoils your good looks when you scowl like that."

This elicited a scattering of snickers. Despite the tense

atmosphere, several cultivators were unable to contain their reactions. Sect members from Huohuang Pavilion and Taxue Palace stared at this so-called sect leader as they might an imbecile.

The young lady, under the misapprehension that she would be universally adored by all men, raised her chin to bare her snow-white neck and declared, “If you feel you’ve faced some injustice, why not talk about it peaceably? As long as you’re reasonable, under my leadership, the ten great sects of the upper cultivation realm will treat you fairly.”

At this, even the sect leaders who’d remained stoic could no longer hold back. Taobao Estate’s Ma Yun, being a merchant with a mind for math, let out a startled “Pardon? How many great sects of the upper cultivation realm? Ten, you say?”

Taxue Palace’s palace leader, Ming Yuelou, replied expressionlessly, “She miscounted. Ignore her.”

“Ah, got it.” The easy-going Ma Yun subsided with a smile.

The expressions on Wubei Temple’s Master Xuanjing, as well as the elders of Huohuang and Shangqing Pavilions, were not nearly so equanimous. Yet however dark the expressions on the other sect leaders’ faces, they couldn’t hold a candle to Jiang Xi’s. Though he didn’t say a word, the girl’s declaration of *under my leadership* had clearly gotten under his skin. He fidgeted with his sect leader’s ring and eyed her dourly.

The girl was still going, completely oblivious. “Let’s all take a moment to talk things over calmly. We can take turns saying our piece and then circle back—wouldn’t that be nice?”

Sparks practically flew from Xue Meng’s reply: “Circle your ass back home if you want to talk! Sichuan is no place for silly girls like you!”

Startled tears welled up in the young lady’s eyes, and she turned back to her da-shixiong and da-shishu with a sniffle. “He—he’s being so mean—he scolded me.” The rest came out between sobs. “I was just talking; why’s he being so fierce…”

Jiang Xi, Ming Yuelou, and Master Xuanjing watched the spectacle in silence. One member of the audience murmured under their breath, “Jiangdong Hall is really done for.”

“Who’s this little chit? She can’t compare to Huang Xiaoyue.”

Mei Hanxue was also in attendance; on hearing this, he rubbed his nose and said with a smile, “Not true. The young lady certainly beats Huang Xiaoyue in looks.”

The foolish girl's crying sent her Jiangdong Hall shixiong into a tizzy. One young man, more naïve than the rest, fished out a handkerchief for her to wipe her face, then turned icily to Xue Meng. "Behavior truly befitting the disciple of Chu-zongshi and the cousin of Mo Ran."

The topic of Chu Wanning and Mo Ran was a sore point for Xue Meng, one not to be brought up. Xue Meng narrowed his eyes dangerously. But the fellow continued, laying a deep, sarcastic emphasis on each word. "Disciple to a criminal and cousin to a murderer, yet you have the gall to strut around like you're so magnificent?"

The words had hardly left his mouth when Longcheng flashed, its point coming to rest at the young man's throat. Silence fell over the hall.

The fellow had never expected Xue Meng to threaten him so directly with that cold, glinting blade. The equally frigid look in Xue Meng's eyes sent his reason fleeing, and his face paled as his mouth opened and closed around words he no longer dared to say.

"That's right. I'm magnificent. You're saying I'm not?" Xue Meng's hand trembled with the force of his rage, and the tip of his blade, pressed to the man's neck, broke skin. "What about you? Who the hell are you to come to Sisheng Peak and talk shit to me like this?"

The sight of Xue Meng's naked anger conversely calmed Xue Zhengyong. He said heavily, "Sit down, Meng-er."

Xue Meng turned and shot back, "Am I supposed to let them keep slandering us like this?!"

Xue Zhengyong looked back at him helplessly.

Xue Meng's gaze swung to scrutinize each gossipmonger individually. His chest heaved, and when he opened his mouth to speak, his voice shook with anger despite his efforts to keep it steady. "Unbelievable. Sisheng Peak has never acted unjustly; we've always sent our disciples rushing at any sign of trouble. Why do you think we went through all that trouble? For fame? For money? For forbidden techniques?"

The chilly glare from Longcheng shimmered in the air. "Honored cultivators and sect leaders," he gritted out with red-rimmed eyes, tearing into the gathered audience's self-important posturing: "Let me ask you: Twenty years ago, when Wuchang Town was nearly overrun by ghosts, where were you? Fifteen years ago, when there was a Heavenly Rift over Sichuan that left nine out of ten houses grieving, where were you? Three years ago, when the barrier over Butterfly

Town once again tore open and swarms of demons forced the common people from their homes to wander the land, starving—once again, where were you?"

There was a watery sheen to his gaze, but his voice was unyielding, adamant in its intensity. "Over the years, the lower cultivation realm has sent plea after plea for help, has begged you all to lift one finger in aid, to no avail. How much did Rufeng Sect charge for their exorcism services? The refugees of the lower cultivation realm can hardly afford food to put on their tables, let alone the services of such *honorable* cultivators as yourselves."

These words seemed to hit home. Several of the listeners bowed their heads in consideration. Yet others were all too willing to lay the blame at Rufeng Sect's feet and wasted no time jabbering, "That's right! Rufeng Sect was heartless, but that's got nothing to do with us. *My* sect only charges a few hundred silver for exorcism services. Young Master Xue is painting us all with too broad a brush with these accusations."

"Right. A few hundred silver," Xue Meng sneered. "Daozhang, have you ever visited a Sichuan village before?"

The naysayer could not muster a reply.

"Go take a look at the southern regions of Sichuan. See for yourself what Fengdu Ghost City is like, what's left at the base of Mount Emei. Then talk to me about a few hundred silver."

"Young Master Xue. This humble one knows you hold pain and suffering in your heart." Master Xuanjing sighed with regret, yet his next few words undermined his brief show of sympathy. "But the fact remains that Sisheng Peak has produced a disciple who pursued the forbidden techniques—not to mention an elder who, in order to protect him, broke him out of Tianyin Pavilion's sentencing grounds and killed eleven of their cultivators in the process. Sisheng Peak must answer for these two wrongdoers' misdeeds."

Xue Meng was furious, his scowl so dark it was like a thundercloud on his brow. "Did the master not see with his own eyes how many Tianyin Pavilion members there were on that platform? They were attacking with deadly force! Was Shizun supposed to sit there and wait to be killed?!"

A bystander immediately pounced on the implication hidden in his impulsive outburst. "Oh? So Young Master Xue thinks Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were right to resist Tianyin Pavilion?"

"Making excuses for a murderer—the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!"

“It’s inexcusable. Sisheng Peak is beyond saving; it has to go.”

This last line was too much for Xue Zhengyong; fury pulsed through him, making his injury flare with pain. He clenched his fist and endured the agony before fixing his gaze on the speaker, expression dark. “Surely you jest.”

“It’s no jest.”

Xue Zhengyong’s eyes narrowed, and he slowly turned to face the source of the voice. “Jiang Xi.”

Jiang Xi had not participated in the smear campaign, but neither had he spoken up in support of Sisheng Peak. He stood in the hall, inscrutable in his pale green robes embroidered with silver pollia flowers. In truth, he had no desire to wade into this muddy discourse, but if he didn’t speak now, the situation would only escalate. He raised his eyes to meet Xue Zhengyong’s. “According to the cultivation world’s rules, if a disciple studies the forbidden techniques, it doesn’t matter if they learned it in secret. The failure lies with the sect for their negligence in failing to teach the disciple better.”

Xue Zhengyong’s face went deathly pale.

“To prevent further trouble,” Jiang Xi continued, “once it’s been discovered, it’s expected the sect will take immediate measures to denounce the disciple and detain them. Surely Xue-zhangmen is not unaware of this.”

He was aware. But although it was true that the rule existed, it hadn’t been enforced in centuries, if ever. How many disciples did the average sect have? There was no way to keep an eye on every single one at all times. Whether Rufeng or Guyueye, Wubei Temple or Shangqing Pavilion, no sect could confidently say they’d never produced one or two disciples who’d attempted the forbidden techniques. Master Huaizui was well-known for his mastery of the Rebirth technique—yet would anybody go up to Wubei Temple and demand their abbot step down? The rule was frankly meant more as a deterrent than a law in the true sense of the word. Yet now this almost forgotten decree was being wielded to bludgeon Sisheng Peak while they were down. These cultivators feared Sisheng Peak was plotting some dark conspiracy, and had reached for this obscure rule to force the sect into dissolution.

Xue Zhengyong was silent, but his expression was dark as he glared at Jiang Xi like a lone wolf surrounded on all sides. After a moment, he asked Jiang Xi, “Don’t you find this absurd?”

“I do. But the rules are clear—my hands are tied.”

“Rules.” Xue Zhengyong scoffed. His fingers kneaded at the

sculpted beasts on the armrests of his sect leader's seat as he closed his eyes and sighed. "For twenty years, the upper cultivation realm has had the final say on how strictly or leniently the rules are enforced. Nothing's changed."

A conflicted look flitted across Jiang Xi's face. He pressed his lips together instead of answering. It was another sect leader who butted in to say, "Xue-zhangmen, please follow the rules and dissolve Sisheng Peak."

"Nobody is above the law, Xue-zhangmen. You know what you need to do."

"Everything has laws governing it. After all the trouble you've caused, are you really gonna try and claim you're innocent?"

In the buzz of the crowd, someone turned to Jiang Xi. "Jiang-zhangmen, we've received complaints from every major city. Sisheng Peak must face the consequences of their actions. You're the leader of the cultivation realm—isn't it time you started acting like it?"

Jiang Xi remained silent as the crowd's attention turned to him. His brows drew together, and after a moment, he said evenly, "There have indeed been many accusations leveled against Sisheng Peak. Given the current unrest, we cannot afford to take them lightly. Xue-zhangmen, by law, Sisheng Peak must be disbanded. If, at some later time, you can furnish evidence that proves your innocence, perhaps we can—"

He was interrupted by an indignant shout. "Jiang Xi, watch yourself!"

"Young Master Xue," Jiang Xi said after a moment's pause. He was by nature apathetic and unused to being rushed. Already irked at having his hand forced by the sects, his mood was not improved by being snapped at by a brat who dared to address him without his title. The veins on his forehead throbbed as he narrowed his eyes at Xue Meng. "Haven't I told you not to interrupt when your elders are speaking? You're over twenty, yet you're sorely lacking compared to your fellow young master Nangong Si."

His harsh response merely stoked the flames of Xue Meng's fury. With one foot, he shoved aside the cultivator in front of him and charged toward Jiang Xi, gripping his lapels and shoving the sect leader against a pillar.

"Jiang Xi!" Xue Meng's gaze was sharp as a blade, his blood surging in his veins. His words came out dripping with hatred. "Comparing me to Nangong Si?! Why not compare yourself to Nangong Liu and see how you like that?"

Despite the assault on his person, Jiang Xi's expression only grew chillier. "You're young, so I'll give you some advice. Unhand me."

But of course Xue Meng wouldn't listen. He'd been pushed far past the point of endurance and continued through a clenched jaw, "If you ask me, you're even less fit than Nangong Liu to lead the cultivation world! You've twisted everything around, turned right into wrong. You…you…"

Everyone was shocked at this turn of events. Even Guyueye's own disciples were slow to react—they'd never expected anyone to lay hands on their sect leader like this.

Glaring straight into Jiang Xi's icy gaze, Xue Meng bit out, "Jiang Xi, you *bastard*."

These final words sent Loyalty Hall into an uproar.

"The impudence! Xue Meng! How dare you speak to your elders this way!"

"So much for the darling of the heavens! All that training wasted on a lowlife like you!"

Jiang Xi lifted his chin, a faint light flashing in his eyes as he stared Xue Meng down. He reached up to grip the hand Xue Meng had wrapped in his lapels. One twist of his wrist and—

Pop.

The sickening sound of a joint dislocating echoed through the hall. Xue Meng grunted in pain.

"Meng-er!"

With the cool composure of someone who had just tossed out the trash, Jiang Xi shoved Xue Meng away and fastidiously straightened his attire before turning to Xue Zhengyong. "Xue Zhengyong, what a fine job you've done raising your son."

Xue Meng's shoulder was dislocated, yet he still made to charge right back, only stopped by Guyueye's disciples drawing their swords.

At the end of his patience, Jiang Xi knit his brows and snapped, "Dissolve the sect."

"Dissolve the sect!"

"Sisheng Peak needs to be dissolved!"

The dense mass of people swarmed inward. Nothing was more effective than fear in uniting people beneath its banner. From the countless roaring mouths of the crowd came the same cry: Sisheng Peak, this breeding ground for evil, must be dismantled and dissolved

without delay.

Chapter 283:
The Beacons Are Lit

THE ATMOSPHERE within Loyalty Hall was so tense the slightest spark would set it ablaze. Sisheng Peak's disciples stood off against the disciples from the other sects, neither side willing to budge. Like a bow pulled to full draw, either the arrow would fly, or the string would snap.

Taxue Palace's leader, Ming Yuelou, stepped forward out of the crowd. "May I remind everyone that the law is not a living, breathing thing." Her mild, melodious voice broke the strained silence. "In Sisheng Peak's view, with no definite proof that they've created any pawns, the call to dissolve the sect must indeed appear extreme. A suggestion, if I may. Let us confiscate Sisheng Peak's scrolls on forbidden techniques as a precautionary measure, then come to a decision after we've had the chance to properly investigate."

Master Xuanjing shook his head. "Palace Leader Ming, do not let your close relationship with Xue-zhangmen cloud your judgment. Sisheng Peak has already violated a taboo of the cultivation world. What need is there for further investigation?"

"Sisheng Peak is not the only sect to have committed such a violation, Abbot; you know this." Though her voice was pleasant, Ming Yuelou's tone was resolute. "If you wish to press on details, I would remind you of your own sect's Master Huaizui."

"You—!" Xuanjing scowled and shook his sleeves out before regaining his composure. He put his fingers together and said, "A technique used to save lives is not the same as the Zhenlong Chess Formation."

"Is that life-saving technique not one of the three forbidden techniques?"

The one who'd spoken this time was Xue Zhengyong. By now, those close to him were beginning to realize something was wrong. The sect leader's breathing was labored, and his lips were pale; his demeanor was a shadow of his usual confident swagger.

"That is true," Xuanjing reluctantly conceded.

Xue Zhengyong closed his eyes and sighed. After a moment, he opened them to look at Master Xuanjing and said in a hoarse voice, "Then how can the abbot make an exception to the rules just because it's a technique that can save people?"

Xuanjing hesitated, unable to think of a rebuttal. He eventually landed on: “They are two entirely different things.”

“What do you mean, two entirely different things?” a disciple of Sisheng Peak burst out in reproach. “The upper cultivation realm has its fair share of those who’ve studied forbidden techniques, they just weren’t successful. If you’re going to use this law against us, shouldn’t you lead by example and disband your own sects?”

“Wubei Temple has Huaizui and Guyueye has Hua Binan,” the Tanlang Elder said darkly. “So why is it only Sisheng Peak that’s being called to account? If Jiang-zhangmen wished to shut down Sisheng Peak, why not first announce that you’re dissolving Guyueye?”

Hearing their own logic turned against them, the gathered sects felt their consciences pricked. Those who had been loudest earlier were now silent, hoping their own sects wouldn’t be dragged in next.

Xue Zhengyong coughed weakly, lashes lowered as he discreetly swiped away the blood he’d coughed into his palm. He looked up and forced a laugh. “Well, it seems no one here is innocent. And I’ve seen no evidence of the ridiculous claim that Sisheng Peak is creating pawns to—what was it, turn the cultivation world upside down? If I may be so bold: Perhaps it’s time for you all to take your leave.”

“This…”

The mob, so self-righteous in their efforts to stamp this sect out of existence, had never expected the confrontation to end in such a mortifying stalemate. Their expressions had grown truly ugly.

Jiang Xi had only made the journey here with the other sects because the conclusion seemed inevitable; he’d had no enthusiasm for the endeavor to begin with. On seeing that the mob was vacillating, he closed his eyes and said bluntly, “Let us leave for now.”

These words brought no small measure of relief to Xue Zhengyong’s heart. He couldn’t help sighing, the tension in his spine easing slightly. Yet in the next moment, he felt a stabbing pain. He glanced down: Bloodstains were spreading across the dark blue of his robes at his waist. The injury he’d taken yesterday was much worse than he’d realized; he’d need to get the Tanlang Elder to take a look at it soon…

He’d scarcely finished the thought when the doors crashed open, and a dozen Tianyin Pavilion disciples charged in with swords drawn. Their expressions were icy, and as they flooded into the hall, they shouted in carrying tones, “For shame, Xue Zhengyong! How can you claim Sisheng Peak has never made pawns!”

The mob of cultivators hadn’t expected anyone from Tianyin

Pavilion, and their heads snapped around in shock. Yet what surprised them more was the line of several dozen plainly dressed commoners meekly following in Tianyin Pavilion's wake. Some of them were familiar faces—village heads from a few of the smaller villages in Sichuan.

"What's happening…" someone asked.

"Didn't you ask for proof?" a senior disciple from Tianyin Pavilion said darkly. "Well, will these witnesses do?"

Another disciple turned to the mob. "Sisheng Peak is a cesspool of evil, and their leader's the worst of them all. They've been treating Sichuan like their own personal hunting grounds these past few years, forcing the commoners they claim to protect into sacrificing their own children to become Zhenlong pawns. Here are the witnesses—what more proof do you need?!"

Xue Zhengyong leapt to his feet, eyes sparking with fury, and choked through the blood in his throat, "What nonsense!"

"You say it's nonsense, I say otherwise. Ask them yourself and see."

The villagers, clustered together like a group of startled ducks, shrank into themselves, all staring at their feet. None dared to be the first to speak.

"Village Chief Liu?" blurted Xue Meng, his keen eyes spotting a familiar face in the crowd.

Chief Liu shivered violently, darting a quick sideways glance at Xue Meng before skimming off like a slippery fish.

"What are you doing here?" Xue Meng was pitifully naïve when it came to certain things; he still hadn't realized what was happening.

"I…" Chief Liu swallowed thickly, his withered fingers twisting anxiously in his sleeves. He kept his gaze fixed on the floor, shuffling awkwardly in place.

"Speak the truth," a Tianyin Pavilion disciple ordered him. "Tianyin Pavilion will tolerate no lies."

Another shiver wracked Chief Liu, and he dropped to his knees, kowtowing frantically on the floor. "I…I'll talk, I'll talk! Over the years, Sisheng Peak has pretended to perform exorcisms for free, but in truth, they—they've been forcing us to give over our children to them as payment…"

"Bullshit!" Xue Zhengyong roared, slapping the table.

"Continue." The voice of the Tianyin Pavilion disciple overrode

his outburst. “What did they want your children for?”

“I…I don’t know…” An oily sheen of sweat gleamed on the village chief’s brow as he swallowed again, still shivering. “They said they’d teach them cultivation, but we never saw them again. Xiao-Huzi, Xiao-Shitou… They never came back home.”

The Tianyin Pavilion disciple turned to the group from Sisheng Peak.

“Are there any children with these names among your number?”

There was no response—how could there be?

Xue Meng’s blood boiled with fury. Xiao-Huzi, Xiao-Shitou… By the time he’d reached this man’s village to save it, those children had long been eaten by the demons attacking the villagers. “Liar!” Bile rose in Xue Meng’s throat as he shouted, so enraged he felt ill with it. “This is how you repay our kindness? Have you no conscience?!”

Tears streamed down the village chief’s face, but whatever coercive hold Tianyin Pavilion had on him compelled him to continue. “Sisheng Peak is not a good sect… They—they put up a righteous front, but…the truth is…they’ve done all sorts of—all sorts of awful things in Sichuan…” Snot joined the tears flowing down his face, yet he still didn’t dare look up, directing his next words at the ground in a howl: “Sisheng Peak is a scourge on the lower cultivation realm!”

The crowd exploded with chatter. In any other circumstances, cultivators wouldn’t give a moment’s consideration to the words of common folk. But the mob had come here today with the goal of disbanding Sisheng Peak, and their minds had long been made up. They latched onto this “proof” with a fervor and turned it into fuel for their outrage.

“I *knew* there was some ulterior motive behind their so-called good deeds!”

“Xue Zhengyong, what do you have to say for yourself now?”

Xue Zhengyong and Xue Meng were stunned, to say nothing of the disciples and elders of Sisheng Peak. It was one thing to face the mob of cultivators who’d joined forces to besiege them—then, they could wave their arms about and decry the injustice, the slander. But it was another thing entirely to be set upon by these village chiefs and commonfolk from Sichuan. These were the same folk who had offered them eggs and flour as a tearful thanks for saving their lives, who had sworn their undying gratitude, who had said they’d never be able to thank them enough.

These traitorous wolves had personally driven the knife into

their loyal hearts. It *hurt*. Like falling through a hole in the ice into the freezing water beneath, the shock was so painful it numbed them to the core.

More villagers came forward, one after another. The first had eyes that at least held traces of regret, and the second stepped out on trembling legs. The third, though, was able to meet the gazes of the cultivators. The fourth spoke with righteous conviction. By the fifth, the speaker was comfortable adding embellishment to the others' tales.

They were like a flock of wild geese: They merely needed one bird to take the lead, and the rest would follow. Enough voices singing the same tune could turn fiction into fact, and as witness after witness came forward, they grew increasingly impassioned, increasingly convinced of their own rightness.

Although Xue Meng's blood ran cold, he couldn't help curling his lip in a sneer. He'd once believed everyone had a backbone, a line they wouldn't cross. He'd never expected so many could stomach the taste of manure to save their own skins.

"That's right, it's that what's-it-called chess piece…" The speaker was the matchmaker from Jia Village. She hastened to add, "They made us give up our children to them in exchange for their help clearing out demons. Sisheng Peak doesn't seek wealth, all they want is children—this is something everybody in the lower cultivation realm knows."

Jiang Xi knit his brows. "If that's so, why seek their help at all?"

"We had no choice." The matchmaker wiped at her eyes with a pink handkerchief. "We're too poor to afford help from the upper cultivation realm. We had no choice but to send over our little ones. They said the children would learn cultivation at Sisheng Peak, but everyone knew…" She sobbed. "We all knew we'd never see those poor children alive ever again."

She thumped her chest and wailed in agony.

"That's right, Sisheng Peak takes payment in people, not coin," a scholar chimed in. "We had to survive, didn't we? So we could only grieve in private. But thank goodness the heavens have eyes and revealed their true nature. Now Sisheng Peak's evil deeds have finally caught up to them! Honored cultivators, please bring justice to the commoners of the lower cultivation realm!"

"Fear not!" Someone from Jiangdong Hall leapt to the call. "The upper cultivation realm is upright and honorable. All of us here today are from respectable, prestigious sects with long histories. Justice will

be served."

The villagers who'd come forward as witnesses began weeping in gratitude, stepping up one after another to sob their grievances against Sisheng Peak's evil deeds. All of them knew that once they'd spoken, there was no turning back. If Sisheng Peak didn't fall today, a reckoning awaited them.

In that moment, it was as if the hall was filled not with people but with circling, scavenging ghosts, opening their bloody maws to gnaw at the weathered pillars supporting the roof, to tear at the simple hangings on the walls, to rip through the plaque above the door that bore the words LOYALTY HALL, fallen into disrepair from lack of funds, and tear it into bloody shreds.

"How…" Xue Meng shuddered, his eyes closing against the tears that fell in spite of him. His voice, when the words emerged at last, was hoarse. "How can you say all this?"

Were they blinded by Tianyin Pavilion's prestige? Had they been threatened? How could they say such things? How could they do this?

The matchmaker was still going; scraps of the vitriol flying from her red-painted lips drifted into Xue Meng's ears—"Sisheng Peak secretly made pawns," "they treated human lives like cattle," "stealing our own children from us."

Every word, every sentence, twisted the truth into a nightmarish refrain.

"A scourge on the lower cultivation realm."

"Wolves in sheep's clothing!"

"Chu Wanning and Mo Ran are the worst of the lot. How many innocent lives did they ruin to make all those pawns…"

Hatred gnawed at Xue Meng's bones. His hands trembled with the intensity of it, all rationality crumbling in the face of its venomous touch. "How—how can you say such a thing?! *How can you do this!*"

Wrath was like a termite, burrowing through the last of his heart's foundations. Xue Meng shoved his dislocated shoulder back into place with a *pop* and reached for Longcheng. It hissed out of its sheath in a deadly arc—before anyone in the crowd could react, its curved blade was stained with blood.

The matchmaker, spouting off about how Sisheng Peak disciples went around raping young girls, froze mid-word, then lowered her head to look at her own chest. She opened her mouth, but all that emerged was a splatter of blood before she crumpled to the ground, silent at last.

The hall went deathly still.

Yet wasn't it strange—though there were several Tianyin Pavilion members standing near the crowd of villagers, not one of them had lifted a finger to defend the woman. Were they taken by surprise? Or did they not care to help? Nobody knew, and nobody would think further on it now.

All eyes were fixed on Xue Meng. Droplets of blood ran down the curve of Longcheng's blade and dripped onto the floor. One drop, two, until a small crimson puddle pooled at his feet.

The phoenix chick had plummeted into an inescapable abyss.

A scream rang out, splitting the air like a death knell. "M-murder—!"

"Xue Meng killed a witness! He's gone mad!"

Chaos erupted. Who moved first was impossible to tell as hot tempers and old grudges flared past their breaking point, like a bowstring pulled until it snapped. Sisheng Peak members and cultivators from the upper cultivation realm clashed openly in the center of the hall.

Vengeance, fear, prejudice. With so many underlying motives, the scene spun out of control almost immediately. In the middle of these furiously clanging swords, Xue Zhengyong gritted his teeth through the pain of his injury and hollered, "Stop fighting! Put your weapons down!"

But even if those from Sisheng Peak heeded him, those from the upper cultivation realm would not. And so the fighting continued.

Xue Meng's heart had been shattered, ground to dust. The rims of his eyes were red as he swung his scimitar at these ghouls. Ugly sobs wracked his body and tears ran down his face. Perhaps, at this moment, the phoenix chick understood what Mo Ran had felt in his childhood, when he'd used the machete to take the lives of everyone at the House of Drunken Jade. There was despair, revulsion, and self-loathing—yet there was also a sickening thrill. Nothing else mattered anymore; the only thing that could quench the fire of fury consuming his heart was shedding hot blood.

A sword cut in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. The blade shone a lustrous blue, distantly familiar—but Xue Meng was too far gone to recognize it, and only shouted at the man holding it, an ugly disciple in Taxue Palace robes, "Get out of my way!"

"Calm down; stop fighting or it'll be too late."

The voice was familiar as well. Who was it? Xue Meng couldn't

place it, but then he didn't care to. Pain and rage churned in his heart. There was only so much a person could endure—past that point, even gods would become demons, and saints become sinners.

A single moment was all it took to change the course of one's life. Xue Meng's eyes flashed with hatred, an endless hatred that had taken root at Tianyin Pavilion and now consumed him with the force of its eruption.

"Fuck off!"

Longcheng and the blue blade screamed as they scraped against each other, but to Xue Meng's surprise, the ugly man was his match, meeting him swing for swing. His eyes, the green of jade, were pinned on Xue Meng's face. "If you don't calm down, you'll make things worse for Sisheng Peak."

"What the fuck do you know! Mind your own damn business!"

Each swing of his scimitar was more frantic than the last, yet every one was blocked by the unyielding blue blade. Green eyes met black. That gaze was so familiar… Who…

"Ziming, stop."

The low voice resounded in his ears. It wasn't an impassioned plea by any means, but there was a discernible trace of anxiety and sorrow in its deep tones.

A bolt of clarity cleaved through the chaos of Xue Meng's mind, and he halted his offensive, chest heaving. He was covered in blood, his hair a bedraggled mess as he pinned that ugly stranger with a furious glare. "You…" Yet before he could continue, a chill ran up his spine.

Xue Meng spun around, raising Longcheng to block too late—with a spray of blood, a blade bit deep into his arm, revealing the white of bone.

"Meng-er!"

At the sight of his beloved son injured, Xue Zhengyong rushed down the stairs to aid him.

The dozen or so Tianyin Pavilion members were Mu Yanli's right-hand men, willing to lay down their lives for their leader. Seeing Xue Zhengyong start forward, their eyes flashed, and they flew at Xue Meng. Any one of them would've been more than a match for an elder from Sisheng Peak, but they circled around the injured Xue Meng like a pack of wolves, intent on taking his life.

"Meng-er… Meng-er!"

But Xue Zhengyong was too far away. As he waded through the melee, more and more people rushed toward him, surrounding him and blocking his path. Desperate to protect his son, he let the blows fall on top of the injuries he'd already suffered, blood soaking his robes.

Gritting his teeth, Xue Meng brandished his scimitar, driving back two attackers with one slash. But the gash on his arm was bleeding heavily, and his entire arm shook. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of something red—

"Look out!"

The very jade-eyed man who'd faced off with him earlier blocked the spell meant for Xue Meng.

A Tianyin Pavilion member narrowed his eyes. "Taxue Palace is defecting? Planning to side with Sisheng Peak?"

The jade-eyed man didn't answer, his blade reflecting a frosty light as he turned to the pale Xue Meng. Ignoring his vicious glare, he said, "Go to Uncle. Now."

"I…" Xue Meng pressed a hand over the gash on his arm, blood seeping through his fingers. The wound was so deep that the pale bone beneath the flesh and muscle was exposed, and his whole arm was soaked in hot blood. His lips moved, but nothing came out.

His gaze swept over the crowd, looking for Xue Zhengyong. When he found him, what little color remained in his face drained away. He staggered toward his father, heedless of the danger. "*Dad!*"

Eyes flashing, Xue Zhengyong surged forward again, raising an arm to block an attack from behind him with his bracer. With a twist of his wrist, he sent his assailant flying backward.

Xue Meng huffed an explosive sigh of relief, then rushed to his father's side, ignoring the fighting around him. "Dad…" When he reached him, he grasped Xue Zhengyong's arm, knuckles white, and said, relieved and agonized, "You're okay… I'm so glad—you're okay…"

In truth, Xue Zhengyong's last block had torn open another old injury. His torso was bleeding afresh, but his robes were already dark with blood; Xue Meng couldn't see it. He gripped his father's hand. "Dad, they need to pay. I won't let any of these people make it out of here alive, I—"

Hacking coughs cut him short. Xue Meng stared as Xue Zhengyong dropped to his knees on the floor, choking out a mouthful of blood.

“Dad…?” The phoenix chick could only look on in a daze. Never had he seen his father so badly injured, and his brain struggled to process the sight. “Dad, what’s wrong? You—”

Xue Zhengyong’s bloodied mouth opened and closed as he grabbed Xue Meng’s arm, the hoarse words coming only after a delay. “Stop this.”

“What…?”

Xue Zhengyong’s eyes were fixed on Xue Meng’s face, but at the edges of his vision, he could see the chaos swirling around them. Was this violence something he wanted? The air was filled with screams and shouts. Crimson blood splashed onto the floor, mingled with the white of brain matter. The mastermind behind these tragedies had yet to be found, but already the sects had turned on each other.

“Sisheng Peak has to stop fighting,” Xue Zhengyong said.

“But they—”

“And fighting here is going to help how?” Xue Zhengyong’s ashen face was weighed down by defeat. “We have no choice. Either the sect gets dissolved, or it gets wiped out.”

Xue Meng couldn’t reply; his eyes were red-rimmed, and his hands trembled down to the tips of his fingers.

“Go on…” Xue Zhengyong gently pushed him forward.

Tears spilled down Xue Meng’s face, but he stumbled to his feet to stand in front of his father before shouting the order: “Everyone, stop fighting! Put your weapons down!”

Chapter 284:
Live On, My Son

THE WORDS SEEMED to drain him of all his pride and strength. Xue Meng closed his eyes, tears coursing down his cheeks.

"Stop fighting…"

But the conflict was like an inferno—easy to ignite and hard to put out. The battle had already left dead and wounded strewn over Loyalty Hall; their blood had become the fuel that fanned the flames of resentment and madness to a roaring peak. Few people heard Xue Meng's howl or Xue Zhengyong's sigh. Even if they did, their eyes were dyed red with bloodlust; they wouldn't stop.

Too much had transpired. Murders, the Heavenly Rift, the Zhenlong Chess Formation, the dead of Guyueye, the mess of Jiangdong Hall, the leaderless Bitan Manor, the massacre at Wubei Temple. Many of the cultivators present had lost friends and family in recent days.

Who was behind it? Who spoke the truth, and who was lying? They had no answer, but everything pointed to Sisheng Peak. The accumulated hatred and fear had detonated here today.

Water spilled could not be gathered up.

Xue Meng hadn't been in a great many battles; he couldn't see the direction things were headed. His chest heaved as he stood in place, staring at the scene of slaughter.

But as Xue Zhengyong looked over the battlefield, he saw it clearly. At this point, no one was in control—this was likely far beyond what even the instigators had imagined. He clenched his jaw, blinking stars out of his eyes as he shoved down the devastating pain in his abdomen. He grabbed Xue Meng by the shoulder. "You need to go. Now."

"Dad?!"

"Get out of here! Go to your mom; don't argue!"

But the horde had already surrounded them, mad with bloodlust. "Xue Meng, you killed my shixiong—you'll pay with your life!"

"You're the son of a beast!"

Xue Meng froze. He'd killed this person's shixiong? When…? He'd never hurt anyone, or taken a life; he'd never…

His mind was a complete mess. In the chaos, he looked down and saw Longcheng dripping with blood. Terror engulfed him. Yes, he'd killed people. He'd killed—first that lying matchmaker, and then…

He didn't remember. He'd madly begun the killing; his face and hands were covered in blood…all of him covered…

Xue Meng threw back his head and howled like a dying beast. Veins stood out on his temples, his face a rictus of agony. How had it come to this… Since the day Mo Ran left, everything had gone wrong. Everything had spun out of control; he'd drifted farther and farther away from the person he used to be.

"I killed someone. Dad… I killed someone…"

He turned in a panic and met Xue Zhengyong's eyes, stark in a bone-white face. Xue Zhengyong grabbed his hands and pulled Xue Meng behind him, wielding his iron fan as he blazed a trail of blood through their attackers.

"Go." On the verge of death, he still gave his son, no longer so young, a way out. "Meng-er, go now."

But Xue Meng only stood there, lost. Yet another attacker came at them, but Xue Zhengyong could no longer swing the fan. He reached out and grabbed the attacker's blade. Blood spurted from the bone-deep cuts. Xue Zhengyong swore, unsheathing a dagger at his waist and burying it in his opponent's belly.

Blood ran in rivers over the floor of the hall.

"Go!" roared Xue Zhengyong. Catching sight of a face in the crowd, he shouted, "Hanxue! Take him! Take him away!"

Mei Hanxue had been trying to press closer this whole time; finally, he broke through. He flew to Xue Meng's side and looked one last time at Xue Zhengyong, his eyes full of suppressed pain. Then he grabbed Xue Meng's arm. "Come with me," he said in a low voice. Cutting a path through the carnage, he dragged the numb Xue Meng toward the back door of Loyalty Hall.

Perhaps the defection of Taxue Palace was too shocking—by the time anyone realized what had happened, Mei Hanxue was at the door, Xue Meng in tow. The remaining cultivators charged at the two of them, shrieking. "You killed our sectmates, and now you're running off? Who's going to pay?!"

One-handed, Mei Hanxue strummed his harp. The *clang* cut through the air like a storm of stone, sending their enemies staggering backward. But he'd barely exhaled in relief when he heard Xue

Zhengyong yell, “Behind you!”

Mei Hanxue whipped around to see a man, face streaked with grime, grinning malevolently as he slashed down at Xue Meng. He raised his hand, too late—

An iron fan scythed through the hall, full of spiritual energy. It swerved in midair and tore a hole through the man’s chest.

“Uncle!”

“Dad!”

Both young men turned in shock. Xue Zhengyong was gasping for breath; he’d clearly spent too much of himself in that final strike. The iron fan, having felled its target, clattered to the floor. Crimson ran down its spines. The words written there, whether *Xue Is Beautiful* or *Others Are Ugly*, were no longer legible.

Xue Zhengyong waved a hand, feebly shooing them away. Voice faltering, he urged, “Go—”

He was still speaking; in Xue Meng’s shrinking pupils, a blade appeared, suffused with spiritual energy. A disciple from Jiangdong Hall stood behind Xue Zhengyong with his sword held aloft. Before Xue Meng could cry out, he brought the blade whistling down on his father’s head.

The world seemed to go silent.

Xue Meng’s eyes widened; he couldn’t hear a thing. It was like he’d sunk to the depths of the sea—there was no breeze, no warmth, no light. Everything was dark. All the blood in Xue Meng’s body seemed to freeze, then boil. Hairs stood up on the back of his neck, his face a rictus of grief as he stared at his father through the mayhem.

Xue Zhengyong had only just watched his son get to safety. A look of relief lingered on his face, frozen in that instant. It almost looked as if he had gone peacefully.

The sea was so deep, a void without end. The freezing water pierced his flesh in an eternal ache. It was so quiet. Dead quiet. There was no sound at all…nothing…

Blood ran from that cracked skull, trickling down his eyes and his cheeks. Two thick streams fell like twin tracks of red tears.

For a single mad moment, Xue Meng thought it must be a joke, or a dream. That everything could be turned back, that there was still time. But he was wrong. He was too late. To care for anyone was to have a weakness—even gods of war could die.

“Dad—!”

His howl echoed like the fall of a mountain into the sea. The silence shattered—waves surged like frothing snow, heavy stone breaking through the surf in a hideous crash that shook the skies. Crazed with grief, Xue Meng staggered toward Xue Zhengyong; his bestial wailing made everyone pause and turn toward him in fear.

The tides parted. He staggered through the crowd, running for Xue Zhengyong.

His father was still standing; his spine had never bent. Even now he stared at Xue Meng, his tiger eyes wide. As if he was still alive, as if he could be saved, as if they could…

Yet as he drew closer, Xue Zhengyong fell. With a great thud, he collapsed, his body still unbent. His assailants scattered.

The fighting had stopped.

Xue Meng stood frozen. He didn't take another step. He simply stood, shaking from head to toe. His minute trembling turned into violent spasms, rippling through his lips, his fingers, every part of him out of his control.

He mumbled, questioning, hesitant, "Dad?"

The hall was awash in blood. No one would ever answer him again. Longcheng clanged to the ground. Xue Meng took a few steps back, then a few more…but where could he go? Back to yesterday? Yesterday would never return. Any step in life—whether taken by thoughtless coincidence or in scouring anguish—could never be undone.

It was silent in Loyalty Hall. Xue Meng's feet stopped; with a shudder, he knelt on the ground, staring dully at the scene before him. Tears streamed down his face; he reached up to scrub them away, but none of his wiping was any use. His tears kept coming. At last, he buried his face in his palms, whimpering softly. His sorrow was like ink on paper, slowly spreading—filling the page with smears of black.

"Dad… Dad!" Those swallowed-up sobs became howling wails. The man who had shielded Xue Meng would never stand up again. Would never beat back the trials of life with his broad shoulders and sunny smile. For the darling of the heavens, the carefree days of his youth now truly came to an end, reduced to a crumbling ruin.

It was a mess—all of it a mess.

The disciple from Jiangdong Hall still stood behind Xue Zhengyong. His sword fell from limp fingers. "No," he mumbled. "No… It wasn't me…"

He shook his head, trembling like chaff as he watched Xue Meng

where he knelt, wild-eyed. He wanted to run, but all eyes were on him. There was nowhere he could go.

"No… I can explain—I… I only wanted to strike the weapon from his hand."

He stared at Xue Meng, swallowing anxiously. Xue Meng was drowning in grief, but the disciple knew the moment Xue Meng looked up, all that awaited him was death.

"Go get Madam Wang." The Xuanji Elder was the calmest among them. He looked at Xue Meng, shivering on the ground. He was still kneeling; he was still sobbing. Xuanji instructed his disciple softly, "Hurry. I fear no one else will be able to stop the young master."

The disciple had just watched his sect leader die, and his own face was streaked with tears. "But Shizun, it was the sect leader who forbade the madam from coming. The madam never gets involved in things like this, she…"

"Is this the time? How are you still nattering on? *Hurry!*"

Scrubbing at his face, the disciple nodded and took to his heels, sprinting toward the back of the mountain.

Now that a sect leader had fallen, the fighting finally died down. Some whimpered from the pain of their injuries, while others were slightly green. Some stood with their lips pursed in silence, while one person whispered, "What happened? Xue Zhengyong shouldn't have been so weak. Why didn't he dodge the blow?"

None of them knew Xue Zhengyong had been attacked by a Zhenlong pawn only yesterday, gravely injured during his mission in Wuchang Town. They sighed. "Ah, I guess he's been a sect leader for too long. Everyone gets old—he was a hero past his prime."

Xue Meng couldn't hear the whispering. Slowly, his vision was dyed red by tears and hate. Choking, sobbing, weeping, his eyes flared scarlet like a sea of red maples. He looked up, staring at the crowd of cultivators. All the clarity and earnestness in those eyes had burned out, leaving only blood and hatred, resentment and fury.

A roar tore from his throat as Longcheng rose to kill.

This time, Xue Meng had truly lost his mind. Those around him screamed; he had become terrifying, devoid of rationality or fear.

Who could stop him? No one! Wubei Temple, Guyueye, Jiangdong Hall, Huohuang Pavilion… *No.* He saw none of them. All he could see were the faces of vicious ghosts, the twisted shapes of shadows. He wallowed in purgatory, in the void, in an endless sea of blood.

All he felt was hate.

Why?

Why had twenty years of devotion crumbled before one scheme, a handful of rumors? Why had a lifetime of earnestness become wasted sincerity, empty effort? Why was a singular act of kindness rewarded, while a habit of doing good deeds was met with scorn?

Why was he so, so foolish?

Blood ran in torrents. He couldn't hear. The pleading of those under his blade was foam and nothingness. Xue Meng had gone insane. A bloodied phoenix amidst burning flames, a crimson-eyed beast rising from an inferno with fangs dripping, snapping its jaws around the throats of all who stood in his way.

Once upon a time, during the year Xue Meng had come of age, Xue Zhengyong had patted Xue Meng's head in the midst of ringing cicada song and asked him with a smile, "What does my son want to do in the future?"

"I want to be just like Dad." The little phoenix had looked up through limpid eyes. "I want to be a great hero, a good man who punishes evil and upholds justice. I want to die with no regrets."

Blood sprayed over his face. Someone was screaming. Who had he killed? Someone's sister, maybe, or their wife. It didn't matter. They could die, he could kill. He had no innocence to preserve. They'd brought this on themselves, after all—they'd driven him to this!

He slaughtered them, consumed by madness. Distantly, he saw that the crowd had parted. He couldn't hear a thing… He couldn't hear…

A quiet voice cut through the ringing in his ears.

"Meng-er."

A shaking voice, doing its best to suppress some great emotion; soft as a spiral of smoke rising from an incense burner, dissipating at the touch of a finger.

The words seemed to grab him by the heart. Xue Meng paused, dazed.

"Take him down!"

"Stop him!"

People came at him from all sides.

"Meng-er…"

Xue Meng was like a panther surrounded by wolves, bathed in

blood. His injured arm was shaking uncontrollably—at this rate, he might never be able to fight with it again. He narrowed his eyes, scarlet streaking his vision, and turned numbly toward the voice.

The back door of Loyalty Hall was open, hazy sunlight slanting in. Madam Wang had appeared at the doorway, dressed in white. Her health was fragile and her temperament gentle; she'd never intervened in such matters—until now, having heard the news and rushed toward the hall. The woman they had always known as meekly beautiful arrived a tear-sodden mess.

"Mom?" rasped Xue Meng, his voice shredded by grief.

The disciples of Sisheng Peak knelt in greeting. "Madam."

The elders made their bows. "Madam Wang."

Her face was white as paper, the bright coral beads of her earrings the only spots of color on her pale figure. She said nothing, first flinching as her gaze fell upon her husband's corpse, then paling further at the sight of Xue Meng disoriented and forced to his knees.

Knowing how frail she was, the members of Sisheng Peak feared she'd faint from the shock. But Madam Wang only trembled, her lips moving but failing to form speech. On her second attempt, she spoke—her voice was awful to hear, but she'd composed herself with all the will she had. "Let him go."

Three words, said softly to those surrounding Xue Meng.

Many of these cultivators had never laid eyes on Madam Wang. Seeing her now, they thought her merely a weak woman and snarled back at her, "Your son's killed so many people; why should we let him go?!"

"He must be brought before Tianyin Pavilion for sentencing!"

Madam Wang's eyes swam with tears, but she repeated herself, resolute: "Let him go."

No one moved. They were locked in a stalemate.

Madam Wang raised her chin, as if trying to keep her tears from spilling over, but to no avail. Salty tears rolled down her cheeks, and she closed her eyes, her slender body shaking like willow fuzz in the wind.

"Sisheng Peak refused to disband and harmed countless cultivators," someone called out. "Not to mention the matter of Mo Ran and Chu Wanning, which is far too suspicious. Regardless, justice must be served. Murder must be paid for with the murderer's life; that's the natural order. Madam, our apologies."

Madam Wang said nothing. She didn't look at her husband's body again. The crowd parted for her as she slowly ascended the steps up to the dais of Loyalty Hall and came to a stop before the sect leader's seat.

A susurration of murmurs continued beneath her. "The death of Xue-zhangmen was an accident, but Xue Meng was aiming to kill."

"That's right, he must be taken into custody!"

The noise rose and fell like the tide. A draft swept through the hall; the curtains fluttered, and a cool light shone through the inner drapes.

"Xue Meng's crimes—"

A resounding *boom* startled the cultivators into silence.

The person slamming their hand down on the table was this woman as frail as a weed. Madam Wang's eyes were wide, her beautiful face flushed. She had never been given to fits of temper, but fury had kindled in her heart. She stood before the hall, eyes sweeping over those assembled.

"Meng-er is my son, Ran-er is my nephew, and Zhengyong is my husband." Her voice wasn't loud, but every word was clear and firm. "You've torn out my nephew's core and taken my husband's life. Now, you want to take my son from me as well?"

For all that Jiangdong Hall had the highest proportion of female cultivators in their sect, it was they who were least sympathetic to Madam Wang. One young woman immediately spoke out. "Lady Wang, be reasonable."

"That's right. If your nephew hadn't cultivated forbidden techniques, would we have cut out his core? If your husband had listened, would this tragedy have occurred today? If your son hadn't killed so many, would there be a need to detain him? Lady Wang, your bias shouldn't be so overt."

The sects had honed their hate for Sisheng Peak. They wouldn't let them off easily.

"Disband the sect!"

"Take everyone who fought here today away! They must all be tried! None of these murderers deserve to go free!"

"None of them should be let off! Round them up!"

Madam Wang stood before the hall, facing the disastrous aftermath of the battle. She closed her eyes, then slowly spoke. "I stand here now as the sect leader's widow. None of you will lay a

hand on Sisheng Peak or my son while I live."

The audience found this laughable. Only Jiang Xi's expression shifted. At the side of the hall, another woman from Jiangdong Hall was the first to respond. "My, you certainly have an elevated opinion of yourself!"

Madam Wang descended the steps, ignoring the female cultivator. She gazed steadily back at those watching her. "What righteousness is there in bullying a fatherless child and a widowed mother?"

She reached the last step and came to a stop on the burgundy carpet embroidered with pollia flowers. When she looked up again, her eyes were still beautiful, her features still gentle, but her gaze was determined. She raised a hand and pulled a silver bangle off her wrist.

The mocking female cultivator narrowed her eyes. "What's this?"

Madam Wang reached up. A beam of blinding red flashed in her palm as she brought her slender hands together and crushed the silver bangle to dust.

Terrified, several people in the crowd took a step back. Even those of Sisheng Peak were stunned into silence; Xue Meng looked at his mother with astonishment. Jiang Xi, and Jiang Xi alone, looked at her without surprise, his expression dreadful.

"Sisheng Peak will persist, in life or death. Those of you who wish to dissolve our sect, come up—" Madam Wang let the silver dust trickle through her fingers. She looked out at the crowd, speaking words that made them pale in fear. "And challenge *me*."

Chapter 285:
The Phoenix Scorches the Sky

With the destruction of the silver bangle came the distant cry of a phoenix. Tongues of flame sprouted behind Madam Wang in the shape of gleaming plumage; a red glow flooded the hall and flames scorched the sky. That ferocious spiritual flow was like an eruption of molten rock, threatening to swallow everything in its path.

Madam Wang stood within the conflagration, raising her slender hands. A handful of writhing flames appeared in her palm, crackling and hissing as they hovered in midair.

"What's going on?! I thought she was spiritually weak!"

"Didn't Xue Zhengyong marry a woman who couldn't learn magic… Wh-what happened?!"

Xue Meng gasped. "Mom?"

Jiang Xi took a step forward. "Chuqing!" he snapped. "Stop this right now! Why would you go so far because of what's happened today?"

It'd been many years since anyone had called Madam Wang by her childhood name. Something indescribable flashed in those eyes dyed red by the reflection of the flames, but it was swiftly swallowed up. Her eyes found Jiang Xi in the crowd. "Jiang-zhangmen, if I didn't go this far, would you leave us be?"

Only silence answered her.

"Would you spare Sisheng Peak? Would you spare Xue Meng?"

Jiang Xi clenched his jaw. "Just stop. We can still talk things out."

Madam Wang shook her head. "You've already cut out my heart, I already lie dead on the floor of Loyalty Hall. I won't let you destroy me a third time."

"Chuqing!"

"Jiang-zhangmen, this ends here."

A phoenix's shrill cry echoed overhead as Madam Wang's clothes began to billow and flare, and her irises brightened to a scarlet red. One sharp-eyed observer noticed the orange glow beginning to shine through the fabric at her waist. "What's *that*?!" she cried in fear.

Jiang Xi swore under his breath and turned to the crowd. "Go

back down the mountain!”

“But this isn’t over; Xue Meng is still…”

“Stay then, if you want to die!” roared Jiang Xi. “That’s Phoenix’s Inferno of Guyueye! Do you treasure your life?!”

Nearly everyone went white. It was widely known that high-level female disciples of Guyueye had a phoenix tattooed on their waists so they could ignite Phoenix’s Inferno in times of danger, but none had ever seen the cursed flame.

The price the technique exacted was too high. In the best case, the user would lose their cultivation, in the worst case, their life. The cultivators poured out of Loyalty Hall like kicked dogs, pushing and shoving as they fled the mountain on their swords. The thick tension filling the space drained away, leaving the hall nearly empty.

Aside from Sisheng Peak’s people, only Jiang Xi remained. The ribbons in his hair whipped in the wind as he turned back to look at Madam Wang. “Your core can’t take it.” He narrowed his brown eyes in something like bewilderment—or perhaps rage, or grief. “Igniting Phoenix’s Inferno with your volatile core? You might have protected your son today, but what about in the future?”

“If I didn’t ignite Phoenix’s Inferno, I wouldn’t even be able to protect my son today.” The flames roared higher and higher around Madam Wang; this cursed flame was one that could never be doused once summoned; it could only burn itself out.

She walked up the jade steps, standing where Xue Zhengyong had grinned and laughed a thousand times. Her scarlet eyes swept over the amassed disciples and elders of Sisheng Peak.

“My sect siblings.” She bowed. “Zhengyong and I both believed that what Ran-er said before he left was true. The pressure from the sects today and the dealings of Tianyin Pavilion are suspect indeed. I trust, after witnessing this, you all have some idea of what is true and what is false.”

The members of the sect all looked with deep concern at this woman who’d always been as fragile as a stalk of grass. Embers sparked and flashed over her clothes, an interplay of light and shadow.

“Sisheng Peak has stood for over twenty years. We have never harmed innocents or committed misdeeds. Despite the slander and false testimony against us, our consciences are clean. But I fear I am too weak to reveal the truth or bring justice to our sect. After this farewell, I have three requests I would make of you. I hope you will honor them on account of our long years together.”

The disciples all bowed their heads. “As the madam says,” they said through their tears.

Xue Meng mumbled, “Mom…”

“Once ignited, Phoenix’s Inferno will burn for three days. No others will be able to approach. My first request is for you all to stay alive. Leave Sisheng Peak and keep yourself safe.”

“How…”

The Tanlang Elder shook his head. “Better to die with the sect than flee like dogs.”

Madam Wang smiled. “This isn’t fleeing. Our great predecessor Nangong Changying of Rufeng Sect once said something I hold dear.”

She looked out over the disciples and elders, just as she had so many times in the past. Those scarlet eyes suddenly appeared as gentle as flowing water, ripples gleaming over their surface. “Nangong Changying once said that it doesn’t matter whether or not the edifices of Rufeng Sect stand. As long as there are those in the world who live by its precepts—as a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, one mustn’t indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or

conquest—the sect has not fallen." Madam Wang paused. "I'll echo his wisdom today. These are the same words I wish to say to you."

"Madam…"

"Leave, and when the truth comes out and everything is resolved—you may return here, if you still wish to."

No one in the hall could say a thing. Only the youngest disciples continued to cry, their tears soaking their sleeves. Madam Wang continued, "As for the second: I ask that you please not make trouble for Ran-er or Yuheng. I believe they had reasons for their actions, and I believe Ran-er did not lie."

With the elders taking the lead, the disciples bowed their heads and repeated. "Those of Sisheng Peak swear not to harm Mo-gongzi or the Yuheng Elder."

"As for my third request." Madam Wang sighed. "I'm afraid the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death will, as Ran-er said, open very soon. At that time…"

She paused, as if unsure whether what she asked was right or wrong, but eventually pressed ahead. "I ask that you please protect the people of the cultivation realm."

The Tanlang Elder's temper, always quick, flared at this. "What have those faithless beasts done to deserve our protection?"

"Madam, you weren't here—you didn't see how foul they were!"

"The cultivation realm is full of all sorts of people—vicious and cruel alike. Kindness is never guaranteed to be repaid," Madam Wang murmured. "But when Zhengyong founded the sect, he didn't do it for gratitude or praise, but on account of his own convictions."

The scarlet in her eyes was growing more vivid now, and the phoenix tattoo at her waist shone brighter. Madam Wang stood amidst the scorching flames. "The world is vast, and the hope of fairness is a hollow one. Even so, doing what's right, upholding our ideals, is the least we can do." She closed her eyes and sighed. "If Sisheng Peak were to turn its back on those in need—just because of a few traitors, just because of the injustice we've suffered—becoming a second Rufeng Sect…that would be Zhengyong's deepest regret. We cannot change those who embrace evil, nor can we see into the hearts of others to know their intent. But we can prevent cruelty and hatred from changing who we are."

Madam Wang smiled faintly. "It is my hope that your hearts will never waver."

With that, the blaze roared up to the skies. The seal containing

the Phoenix's Inferno shattered completely, and terrifying power poured from Madam Wang's slight frame.

In the blink of an eye, a wave of heat and light smashed out of Loyalty Hall like a tidal wave washing over the grounds. Clear Sky Hall, Dancing Sword Platform, Mengpo Hall, Naihe Bridge…the two peaks, the lake and the river, Frostsky Hall, the Red Lotus Pavilion… All were engulfed by the spiritual flames.

This conflagration could sense its master's intent. It swallowed the plants of Sisheng Peak without harming them, and though tongues of flame licked around the disciples and elders standing in the hall, the divine fire left them untouched.

"Go," said Madam Wang.

No one moved.

She sighed and urged them again. "Go. Why are you still standing here? Don't tarry."

Only after her repeated entreaties did the disciples and elders lower their heads and stream toward the doors. Loyalty Hall slowly cleared, leaving only Xue Meng and Jiang Xi.

Jiang Xi cast her one last glance before turning to leave.

"Wait, please." Madam Wang called out, stopping him in his tracks.

"…More final matters to attend to?"

In the firelight, the expression on Madam Wang's face appeared surreal. It flickered in light and then shadow, in coolness then warmth. She hesitated for a long time, as if tormented by what lay deep in her heart. Finally, she closed her eyes and made her decision. "Shidi," she murmured. "Come here. I have something to say to you."

Xue Meng and Jiang Xi were both stunned. Xue Meng couldn't think of a single thing Madam Wang could have to tell Jiang Xi now of all times, and it was clear Jiang Xi felt the same. He narrowed his eyes, watching her without moving. He and Madam Wang were sect siblings, but they'd parted ways and had now gone many years without meeting in private. Her husband Xue Zhengyong was dead at her feet, and Jiang Xi had come here today to dismantle Sisheng Peak —

of course he was wary. "If you have anything to say, you can say it from there. There's nothing between us that can't be aired in front of others."

Realizing she wouldn't convince him, Madam Wang turned to Xue Meng. "Meng-er, go down the mountain. I need to speak to Jiang-

zhangmen alone."

"Mom…?"

"Go. It has nothing to do with you."

Xue Meng's face was caked with blood; his tear tracks stood out stark against the filth. He scrubbed pitifully at his eyes, choking as he said, "I don't want to go. Both of you are here—I'm not going anywhere! I want to stay with you!"

Madam Wang sighed. "If you won't go, wait for me at Frostsky Hall. Once I'm done speaking with Jiang-zhangmen, I'll bring your dad over."

She was already in bad shape; blood seeped from the corners of her mouth. She frowned and coughed, voice soft. "Be good, Meng-er."

Xue Meng shook his head over and over, wiping at his cheeks, but even he knew that having ignited Phoenix's Inferno, his mother hadn't long to live. How could he disobey her and ruin what little time she had left? He went.

Only this pair of sect siblings from Guyueye remained in the vastness of Loyalty Hall. The instant Xue Meng disappeared through the doors, the last bit of strength keeping Madam Wang upright went with him. She collapsed onto the ornate seat in exhaustion, unable to maintain her earlier composure. She stared at the low table in front of her for a very long time, tears streaming down her pale and perfect cheeks. Then she began to cough, violent paroxysms that had blood pouring from her mouth.

Jiang Xi stayed where he was. Seeing Madam Wang choking on her own blood, he seemed to think of going up to her, but he never did. "There's no one else here," he said. "What do you want to say?"

Madam Wang, still coughing, couldn't reply.

Jiang Xi frowned, expression darkening. "Your spiritual core grew unmanageable after the cultivation incident you had back then. Further study was beyond you—yet you've now ignited Phoenix's Inferno? It will kill you."

Madam Wang drew in a shuddering breath, her lashes wet. She stared at the table, eyes unfocused. "Yes, I know."

The ocean of fire had engulfed them but didn't burn them. A scarlet sea billowed between her and Jiang Xi.

"Then what more do you wish to say?"

Madam Wang was silent.

"If there's nothing, I'll take my leave."

Jiang Xi waited another beat, but at the sight of her with her head down, unmoving, he lost his patience. He turned once more to leave, but again her soft voice stopped him. “Shidi.”

The flames danced toward the sky like great plumes of red dust.

“Do you look down on Meng-er that much?”

Her nonsensical question immediately gave Jiang Xi a feeling of unease. “What?”

“You two fought the very first time you met at Rufeng Sect. If I hadn’t come along, you might’ve come to blows.” Madam Wang sighed. “Shidi, he has a hot temper, but please… He’s much like you were in your youth. Don’t argue with him.”

Puzzled, Jiang Xi glanced back at her. “What do you mean?”

Madam Wang didn’t respond. Her silence loomed over them like storm clouds, as if the skies would darken and the downpour would come at any moment.

In that awful stillness, Jiang Xi’s mind flew back to certain events of his youth. His heart pounded, but his expression remained cold, his fingers clenching into fists as he awaited Madam Wang’s answer.

“Xue Meng…” Madam Wang’s sigh was light, but it came like the sharp crack of lightning in the sky, like thunder through the heavens. “You and Xue Meng are very alike. Do you understand, Shidi?”

Though he’d already had some suspicion, hearing the words aloud made Jiang Xi’s head ring. His mind went blank. Who were alike? He and Xue Meng? That junior who was rude and irritable every time he saw him, the one he scorned to his very bones? The idea was absurd…

The hall was quiet. Jiang Xi thought over the meaning of her words, those forgotten truths parting layer by layer like the cracking of dark ice. His expression remained unchanged, but his blood froze over. He felt himself begin to tremble, yet the very thought was ludicrous.

He whirled and stared into Madam Wang’s eyes. Perhaps he’d misheard—but he knew it wasn’t so. Those words were quiet, but each had been clear as water, rushing toward him through the blaze like an inescapable tide.

“Jiang Yechen.” Madam Wang looked up, her lashes sodden with tears and her dark eyes fixed on his. “Xue Meng is your son.”

Chapter 286:
The Lover and the Lost

THE HALL WAS SILENT. Jiang Xi forced a laugh, but his eyes held a hint of fear. “Wang Chuqing, have you lost your mind? What are you saying?”

Beneath his lavish sleeves, his hands balled into fists. He seemed to hear the sound of stone shattering; he was dizzy, almost delirious. “What possible relationship could that boy have to me?”

Jiang Xi’s manner was dismissive, but Madam Wang’s words had already taken him out of his shock and into terror, and from terror to suspicion and then fury. He’d thought himself alone in the world for so many years, without any kin—a son? Telling him *now* that Xue Meng was his son? How ridiculous.

Madam Wang swallowed a mouthful of acrid blood. She caught her breath before she went on, as if what she was about to say was humiliating, but persisted. “I know Shidi hasn’t forgotten what happened back then. As for Meng-er… I would never lie to you.”

Jiang Xi watched her, then began to laugh. His laugh was very rarely so unbridled, yet ridicule and anger filled his eyes. “My son?” He spat the words, every syllable freezing cold. “Shijie needn’t spin such a laughable tale just to entrust your son to me. You could’ve just asked outright. In personality, in looks, in physique and temper, when has your son *ever* resembled me in the slightest?”

A violent unease kept him from acknowledging the truth; he struck out in his denial of it. “Must you use such underhanded tricks to convince me to clean up the mess you and Xue Zhengyong made? How could Xue Meng, Xue Ziming, possibly be my child?”

But his heart shuddered, and a voice at the back of his mind told him in his own icy tones: *Yes, he is your child. Consider his age, consider how Wang-shijie left Guyueye. Ask yourself honestly, with the heavens as witness. Jiang Xi, think back…*

But what was there to think about?! Jiang Xi lashed out like a trapped beast, crushing that voice of rationality in his heart to dust. Why should he remember? He’d been alone for more than twenty years. Now she was telling him he had a son—a son who opposed him in every possible way, wearing a face he hated, and belonging to a father that wasn’t him.

Impossible. He, Jiang Xi, was no pathetic do-gooder with an

excess of kindness; he'd never be a brainless fool. He wouldn't fall for it, he wouldn't believe this nonsense, he wouldn't…

"Xuehuang."

Madam Wang spoke into the silence. It was as if all the light went out of the blazing room: Jiang Xi felt himself plunged into a pitch-black night, caught in an unknowable void. Never in his life had he felt so lost.

Madam Wang's gaze was heavy on him. "Xuehuang," she said again.

"What do you mean?" His bloodless lips trembled.

"Shidi," murmured Madam Wang. "You know what I mean."

And he did. Xuehuang was his holy weapon; though others could make it react, no one else could summon the true strength his holy weapon possessed—save for his kin, whom Xuehuang would gladly obey.

Jiang Xi couldn't say a word. He didn't need to test it. If Madam Wang was willing to say such a thing, what was there left to prove? He was cornered, rendered mute.

"Did…" he rasped after a long beat, face pale, "Did Xue Zhengyong…know?" He seemed to sag with exhaustion now that his earlier madness passed.

"He's known all along," said Madam Wang, her gentle eyes filled with torment.

Xue Zhengyong had first seen her at seventeen, in the full flush of her youth.

He had been riding his little donkey through Yangzhou with a stalk of foxtail grass dangling from his mouth when he happened to run into Wang Chuqing, who'd come to the port to buy cloth.

Among all those beautiful disciples of Guyueye, none but Miss Wang caught his eye. Xue Zhengyong was a frank and straightforward young man; he went right up to her, smiling, to say hello. Her companions called him shallow, and Wang Chuqing herself was a gentle soul who was faintly embarrassed by the whole thing. She turned him away, blushing, then lowered her face and rushed off.

Miss Wang was soft-spoken and pretty, and for Xue Zhengyong, it was love at first sight. His feet brought him back to Guyueye again and again to see her. One year passed, then two, then three—he'd always come find her, be it at the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Dragon

Boat Festival, or the Lantern Festival. Rumors of her affair with this rascal spread throughout Guyueye, and in the end, even the tender-hearted Wang Chuqing tried to drive him off in anger.

At the time, Xue Zhengyong was indeed a young rascal. He refused to be deterred.

"Go," she would tell him. "You're making things hard for me."

"You don't have a lover," Xue Zhengyong would reply, "and neither do I. I only come to see how you're doing. Once you get married, you'll never see me again."

Miss Wang was speechless.

Xue Zhengyong grinned. "I promise, I'll disappear faster than a bolt of lightning." He then paused, a note of concern creeping into his voice. "You…you don't have someone in mind already, do you?"

Miss Wang's cheeks went pink. She lowered her head like a blossom bending over water and said, "No," very softly.

But it was a lie. Of course she had someone in mind, and she wasn't the only one. The young man she admired was the object of many of Guyueye's female cultivators' affections—she liked her shidi Jiang Xi very much.

All the disciples of Guyueye knew Jiang Xi was scum. Within his generation, he had the most handsome face, the finest skills, the most mesmerizing voice, and the most untouchable heart. Those to whom he deigned to speak found him aloof and acerbic, but nevertheless, he was strong, vicious, and gorgeous. Shining stars like him collected girlish hopes by the bushel, but Jiang Xi valued girlish hopes about as much as he did pig offal. He cherished no one; when women offered up their hearts, he scorned them for their chatter, and when men offered up theirs, he called them freaks.

Jiang Yechen lived in a world of his own and hurt people with oblivious ease.

Like many of her sect siblings, Wang Chuqing had always carried a torch for Jiang Xi. She knew her looks left something to be desired, and she was older than him to boot. She never dared take the step of confessing her feelings. After all, Jiang Xi had never accepted any woman's affection. When others praised him, he ignored it; when others fawned on him, he didn't care a whit. If anyone ever mustered the courage to confess, he cursed them out until they ran away in hopeless tears.

Anyone brave enough to tell Jiang Xi their feelings was a hero in their own right. Madam Wang didn't think herself a hero, so she

resigned herself to the notion that she and her affection would age together and be sealed in the same coffin.

One day, however, the sect leader summoned them both. “Our Guyueye Sect specializes in extending the lifespan by nourishing the primordial spirit. Most of our disciples will live over a hundred years. For generations, our sect leaders have devoted themselves to cultivation methods that prolong life, in hopes of finding the road to immortality, that we may roam the world forever even without ascension.”

Indeed. Seeking the key to eternal life, the sect leaders of Guyueye tested all sorts of methods, which of course included Xuannü’s[3] dual cultivation techniques. Jiang Xi had a pure water elemental core, while Wang Chuqing’s was pure fire. Both these youths were still virgins, so this cultivation method suited them perfectly. For this reason, the sect leader had summoned them to be each other’s cultivation partner.

Wang Chuqing had loved Jiang Xi for a long time; she was of course delighted. Jiang Xi felt nothing in particular. He was entirely focused on cultivation and despised such trifling matters as love, which he found irritating as well as useless. How were there so many fools in the world suffering from unrequited affections? He couldn’t fathom it.

“Love is a disease,” he was wont to say. “You’d better get yourself checked out.”

Who knew how many maidens’ hearts had shattered upon hearing these words from the most beautiful man in Guyueye.

To him, not even the bedroom techniques of Xuannü should involve any emotion. Dual cultivation was a method like any other; since the sect leader had asked it of them, he wasted no time going into seclusion with his shijie and cultivating based on the scrolls provided.

But the adoration in the girl’s eyes was impossible to ignore. As time passed, Jiang Xi gradually came to understand what this shijie felt for him. It frustrated him, made him uneasy. He was dual cultivating with her on the sect leader’s orders, nothing more, and this technique specifically required clarity of mind and freedom from worldly desires. Their bodily union was only to facilitate the merging of their spiritual energy; any love or lust was forbidden.

To this end, Jiang Xi had warned his shijie several times to think of nothing else. “If your mind isn’t clear, dual cultivating like this will lead you right into qi deviation. Your core will become volatile.”

But how could Miss Wang control her own feelings? Eventually, at the end of one particular session, her surging emotions knocked her spiritual energy out of true—she became delirious.

It cost Jiang Xi a great deal to bring her inflamed core back under control, and he flew into a rage when he had finished. Why hadn't she listened? Why couldn't she stay focused?! "Continuing like this will kill you. We should stop."

At the time, she had been inconsolable. Somehow she summoned the courage to ask him, eyes glistening, "Yechen, when you cultivate with me, is it only because of the sect leader's orders?"

Jiang Xi's scowl deepened. "Why else?"

She'd known from the start that Jiang Xi was as cold as a glacial spring with a heart of unfeeling stone, but hearing him say it aloud was more than she could bear. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Humiliated, she reached up to wipe them away, but they kept coming, leaving her even more flustered. She scrambled to her feet, voice thick with her shame. "I'm sorry."

She turned and left without looking back.

For a long time after, Jiang Xi didn't bother to seek her out, and never spoke to her if he saw her walking by. Their interactions didn't escape the notice of several young and beautiful cultivators of Guyueye, who mocked her behind her back. "Throwing herself at him like that—did she really think she could catch Jiang-shige? She's delusional."

"She certainly thinks highly of herself. Dual cultivation is just dual cultivation. If she *had* qi deviated, she'd have hurt Yechen-shixiong for nothing. What a pest."

"What do you mean, dual cultivate? Shixiong did it as his duty, but she did it for her own reasons. Everyone knows she's in love with him. *Hmph*, if you ask me, she just wanted to take advantage!"

"Wang-shijie is older than we are, and she's more shameless too!"

The rumors went from mouth to mouth, all the way to the ears of Xue Zhengyong, who'd come as usual to spend Mid-Autumn with Miss Wang.

The gallant young cultivator was forthright but not stupid. He quickly put together what had happened and furiously told the gossips off before running around in search of Miss Wang. But by the time he found her, he didn't know what to say. He could only stare. "You…"

Wang Chuqing looked up from where she stood beneath a

willow tree, her eyes still red from crying.

Xue Zhengyong grew flustered. “Don’t cry—you don’t have to listen to all that, you… You… I think you’re great, I…I…”

Wang Chuqing turned her face to the rippling surface of the lake. “I lied to you. There is someone I like.”

There was a long pause. “Mn,” said Xue Zhengyong.

“Then why are you still here?”

Xue Zhengyong scratched his head. “But it sounds like he doesn’t think of you like that… Since he doesn’t, I… I can still talk to you, can’t I? He won’t mind.” Met with her silence, Xue Zhengyong hesitated. “Will he?”

Miss Wang hung her head. “No.”

What *did* Jiang Xi think of her? He’d only ever been following the sect leader’s orders; she was the one who let her wishful thinking get the better of her. Everyone in the sect agreed that Jiang Xi was scum, but Wang Chuqing thought being labeled as such merely because he refused to accept another’s love was perhaps too harsh. Jiang Xi never led anyone on or gave them false hope. They were the ones drawn to him like a moth to a flame; she’d known of his merciless apathy, yet gone running passionately after him just the same.

Now it hurt too much to go on. But by some twist of fate, it came to pass that either the disciples in charge of preparing the medicines had made a mistake, or perhaps there was some other reason, because Miss Wang soon realized she was pregnant.

Panic had gripped her then. What should she do? She could only imagine what her sect sisters would say, how they might jeer at her once it became known, and she scarcely dared contemplate how Jiang Xi would react. She was a complete mess, hopelessly lost for what to do. When she finally pulled herself together, she decided to go find the sect leader.

But when she arrived outside his door and raised a hand to knock, the cool, clipped voice drifting out froze her in place. It belonged to Jiang Xi.

“Shijie cannot control her heart; her core is growing more and more unstable. Now even the smallest spell throws her spiritual energy out of control. I’m afraid continuing will hurt her. I ask the sect leader to please retract the order. I cannot dual cultivate with her anymore.”

“Oh, Xi-er. What if you talk to her and—”

“There’s no use in talking; I’ve told her the same many times; there’s nothing I can do. She simply isn’t suited for this cultivation path. Chuqing’s heart is too easily swayed.”

“Then what are you proposing?” asked the sect leader.

“If no one can clear their mind of worldly desires, I will no longer cultivate this path.”

The sect leader sighed. “I understand. You may go. Clearing one’s mind of worldly desire is the hardest trial in the dual-cultivation path. In all these years, I don’t know if anyone in Guyueye has been as unshakeable as you.”

Jiang Xi paused a moment and asked, “Is it that difficult?”

“Extremely difficult.” The sect leader examined him. “Tell me, after spending so much time with Wang Chuqing, were you never swayed in the slightest?”

Jiang Xi sounded faintly confused. “Swayed…in what way?”

The sect leader watched him for a long beat, but saw no hint of a lie in the young man’s eyes. He seemed somewhat taken aback. “Jiang Xi, what is Wang Chuqing to you?”

“My da-shijie.”

“And when you’re dual cultivating?”

“My dual-cultivation partner.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing.” The sect leader’s expression made Jiang Xi frown. “*Should* there be anything else?”

“No.” After a long moment, the graying old sect leader sighed. “It’s been so many years, yet no dual-cultivation disciple has ever managed to pass the trial of love. You are the first. Unfortunately, I can’t think of a single other person who could complete this task with you.”

Neither Jiang Xi nor the sect leader knew Miss Wang had overheard their entire conversation. If she had held onto any hope or illusion before, their talk chilled her to the bone and wiped out her remaining pride. She felt pathetic. How could she stay in the sect after this—how could she face anyone? She’d nearly buckled beneath her sect sisters’ mockery as it was; if they learned she’d fallen pregnant with Jiang-shidi’s child…

The thought made her shiver. No—she couldn’t stay in the sect any longer. She fled Rainbell Isle that very night.

“You didn’t elope with Xue Zhengyong?”

"No," said Madam Wang.

Jiang Xi closed his eyes. He didn't know what to say. He *was* a callous person, he *did* only have eyes for his cultivation path. After Madam Wang, he'd never so much as touched another woman. And back then, he was certain he felt nothing for this da-shijie—though when he'd heard that Madam Wang had eloped with Xue Zhengyong, he did frown.

Truly, worldly love was as fleeting as a flower's bloom; the women of the world were not to be trusted. Even this shijie who had supposedly loved him would run away with another young man at the drop of a hat. He grew to despise matters of romance—even now, the memory filled him with disdain.

Only today, twenty years after the fact, did he learn the truth from his da-shijie's own lips. But Miss Wang had become Madam Wang, and the greatest years of their lives had passed.

There was a stiff silence before Jiang Xi asked, "Then…why did you leave Guyueye?"

"I could no longer live under the same roof as you, Shidi." Twenty years later, Madam Wang could finally look at him peacefully. "Everyone has their pride. I couldn't face staying in the sect."

Jiang Xi said nothing.

"At first, I thought of killing Meng-er in the womb, but I couldn't bear to do it. So I traveled through all sorts of places, alone, and in Baidi City, I gave birth to our child. When Zhengyong found me, Meng-er was already more than a year old. He's always known."

She paused to cough up more blood. After her qi deviation, her core had always been volatile; she'd only suppressed it all these years by never using magic. Now, with Phoenix's Inferno scorching the skies, her life had reached its end.

Madam Wang slowly stopped coughing, her breaths growing thin. "Shidi, the tale of Zhengyong kidnapping me to Sisheng Peak to make me his bride was just a story he spread. He never wanted me… or Meng-er…to be hurt."

She looked around and glimpsed Xue Zhengyong's corpse; the sight seemed to stab into her. She still remembered the day of their wedding, when Xue Zhengyong had told her with a grin, *All right, from now on, you have nothing to worry about. That bastard back at Guyueye humiliated you, but I won't. Now that you're with me, you'll live in glory all your life. As long as I'm here, you'll never feel shame again.*

Madam Wang looked away, shaking. A gentleman's word was

his bond, and Xue Zhengyong had kept his all his life. By his side, she had never had to put herself out in the world; she had always been protected. The tears she wept, the shame she felt, the blood she shed…all of it came after his death.

"He never cared that I was too weak to bear another child. He never cared that Meng-er wasn't his blood; he still treated him as his own. Xue Meng… Xue Meng is grown now, but he's never truly suffered…" She closed her eyes, her cheeks so pale they appeared almost translucent. "We can't protect him anymore."

Jiang Xi stiffened.

"Shidi, take these twenty years as my vengeance on you. Any resentment, hate, any scorn…lay it all at my feet, and mine alone." Madam Wang's voice was so hoarse now it was hardly intelligible. "I beg of you, help him… Don't let them hurt him." Her plea came soft as drifting willow fuzz. "Yechen, *please*…"

Phoenix's Inferno rose into the skies. Jiang Xi stood alone in the sea of flame, surrounded by blazing vermilion. He looked at the woman seated on the dais, her eyes closed as if in sleep. He was sure she had more to say. After all, she'd only just promised Xue Meng they'd meet again at Frostsky Hall. He waited patiently. He waited for her to stand up, to tell him it was all a lie. A joke, a farce.

He waited a long time, his expression darkening, until his heartbeat began to slow and his blood began to cool. But she said never a word more.

Madam Wang passed on with Xue Zhengyong. She'd once been a cultivator of high renown, known for her gentleness and virtue. Rumors later spread that Xue Zhengyong had stolen her away to be his wife; others told of how she'd eloped with him and left her sect behind. There'd been so many tales, yet none of them were the truth.

For years, many in Sisheng Peak had speculated that Madam Wang merely tolerated her husband, but that she was too timid to complain. In the end, it didn't matter what anyone else thought or said—the moment she heard of Xue Zhengyong's death, she'd lost the will to live. Was it love driving her desire to follow him, or something else? Perhaps she couldn't have said herself, even at the very end. Had she truly loved her husband, or was it only gratitude? Had her feelings for Jiang Xi disappeared long ago, or had they left their mark? She didn't know.

These questions, like so many in life, were destined to go unanswered. In her last moments, she hazily recalled the lines of a poem she'd read by the windowsill many years ago. *With these sleepless*

nights I repay the care I've lost in your absence.[4]

In those days, she'd just married Xue Zhengyong, and she'd often reminisce about her youth spent in Guyueye. She looked up from her book and gazed out the window. The fogs of Sichuan were thick, drifting and scattering like celestial clouds—as if this, too, could be heaven.

Someone approached her from behind. In her distraction, she almost mistook him for Jiang Xi—but then a coat was draped over her shoulders. The dream shattered. Jiang Xi would never care whether she was cold or not. Madam Wang turned, her face framed by the light of the candle and the misty mountains beyond.[5]

Her young and handsome husband was smiling down at her. He scratched his head and said, "It's getting cold. I didn't want you to catch a chill."

The thick carpets of Loyalty Hall were patterned with pollia flowers, Madam Wang's favorite floral motif. Jiang Xi stepped out of the hall and left those blossoms behind, his expression still cold, but slightly more wooden than usual.

As he pushed open the creaking doors, wanting to be gone with all haste, he caught sight of the figure standing just beyond them, pale and motionless.

Xue Meng.

Chapter 287:
Inescapable Fate

JIANG XI SAID nothing, and neither did Xue Meng.

After a long silence, Jiang Xi spoke. “Since you already heard everything. I don’t have to repeat it,” he said, stony-faced.

When Xue Meng made no reply, he spoke again: “Go prepare for their burials according to Sisheng Peak customs.” Jiang Xi turned away, refusing to look at Xue Meng a moment longer. “Your mother entrusted her orphan to me. I’ll wait for you at the foot of the mountain.”

Xue Meng twitched unconsciously. All the hot blood in him seemed to have been sucked away; even moving his fingers took everything he had. He strode into the dim depths of Loyalty Hall. In the firelight, the blood on the carpet was no longer so vivid, but Xue Zhengyong still lay on the ground. Without his ever-present grin, his face looked more aged, his wrinkles more prominent. White dusted the black at his temples, while Jiang Xi still looked less than thirty, forever frozen at the peak of his youth.

Xue Meng took a few more steps, then came to a stop. “You can go.”

Jiang Xi turned and saw Xue Meng’s lonely silhouette.

“I won’t accept you,” said Xue Meng. “You’re not my father.”

He slammed the doors shut. After a moment, Jiang Xi heard the agonizing sound of Xue Meng’s hoarse and terrible sobbing coming from inside.

Jiang Xi stood silently in the biting wind until his hands and feet were freezing, then made his way slowly down the mountain.

Most of the cultivators, fearing Phoenix's Inferno, had long left. Only a few of Taxue Palace's disciples remained, Mei Hanxue among them. These juniors ducked their heads and bowed respectfully at the sight of Jiang Xi, murmuring, "Jiang-zhangmen."

Jiang Xi felt the muscles of his face taut with strain. He pursed his lips, looking around until he caught sight of Mei Hanxue. "Still here?"

"Waiting for an old friend," came Mei Hanxue's refined and dispassionate reply.

"He won't be coming down for a while," Jiang Xi replied.

"I'll wait, whether it's an hour or a few days. I've nothing else to do anyway. I'll stay right here." He paused. "Jiang-zhangmen, the palace leader left a message for you."

Frustrated beyond measure yet unable to vent it, Jiang Xi asked in clipped tones, "What is it?"

Mei Hanxue bowed. "The palace leader has elected no longer to obey the godly descendants of Tianyin Pavilion, nor to work with the sects of the upper cultivation realm. As the leader of the great sects, Jiang-zhangmen needn't consider Taxue Palace in future matters requiring consensus."

Jiang Xi's face was unreadable. "So you've decided to stand apart from the sects?"

"It is terrifying indeed to stand alone." While Mei Hanxue's gaze, as ever, held a hint of a smile, fluid and charming, his expression was cool. "But blind obedience to something like the gods is much more terrifying, I think."

Jiang Xi stared at him. He felt inexplicable anger, disdain, frustration. In the past, when Nangong Liu had held this post, Jiang Xi had found his decisions absurd. Yet now that he'd reached the peak himself, he realized many things were out of his control.

Had he truly wanted to punish Mo Ran? Had he intended to blindly obey Tianyin Pavilion? He had tried to persuade the other sects not to march on Sisheng Peak, but they had refused to listen. As their leader, what could he do? In the past, he'd had his own opinions and could lead Guyueye without a care for anyone else's. But now that he stood atop the dais—now that Guyueye was the world's foremost sect—he found he had nowhere left to turn, and no choice but to become the next Nangong Liu.

He closed his eyes and left with a sweep of his sleeves. Mei Hanxue was nothing if not polite; he bowed toward Jiang Xi's retreating back and said lightly, "This one bids Jiang-zhangmen farewell. I hope we shall meet again."

Jiang Xi didn't answer. His robes of gold-patterned green fluttered after him as he walked off without looking back.

When he'd first sat upon the seat at Spiritual Mountain and taken up Nangong Liu's legacy, there'd been nothing but rowdy shouts and applause beneath the dais. He'd been sure he would be different from his predecessor—that he could change everything that rankled him about the sects all by himself. He'd had ambition, passion, and goals of his own.

Only now did he realize the applause he'd heard that day hadn't been a welcome for the arrival of a powerful leader, but a funeral dirge for a once-unfettered soul. From then on, within the vastness of the jianghu and its borderless skies, one might find Sect Leader Jiang, but never again Jiang Xi.

Xue Meng remained on Sisheng Peak after he buried his parents. When the Phoenix's Inferno died down, Mei Hanxue went up the mountain, as ordered, in search of him. He found Xue Meng unconscious in Frostsky Hall and took him back to Kunlun Taxue Palace.

The master of Kunlun Taxue Palace had made it known that any future decisions made among the sects needn't be brought to Kunlun's attention, and that Kunlun would no longer bend to the laws of the cultivation realm. All ties were summarily severed.

Later, Jiang Xi summoned the sects to Spiritual Mountain to discuss the recent matters of great import. He proposed that, instead of relying on the judgment of a singular party, critical cases should undergo three trials before they were settled: first, the court of law; second, the court of the sects; and third, a court of commoners.

He didn't specify whom he meant by *a singular party*, but everyone knew he was displeased with the role Tianyin Pavilion had played. His suggestion was met with violent rebuttals.

"Tianyin Pavilion was created by the gods—that set of scales used by Pavilion Master Mu during the interrogation was once the God of Justice's own holy weapon. There's nothing fairer than the word of the gods themselves."

"Jiang-zhangmen's recklessness might anger the gods."

The more conservative members, who put all their faith in Tianyin Pavilion and took everything Mu Yanli did as holy writ, somehow had the courage to slam their hands on the table and jump to their feet. “Tianyin Pavilion has been the crown jewel of the cultivation realm for thousands of years—they’ve cleared the names of so many innocents who were wrongfully accused. Their continued existence ensures villains hesitate to break the law. Jiang-zhangmen, do you wish to stamp out this sacred torch of the cultivation realm?”

“Do you all think Tianyin Pavilion is really so pristine and untouchable, that they can do no wrong?” snapped Jiang Xi.

“Tianyin Pavilion is of divine origin and has stood for thousands of years. Of course it can do no wrong!”

“We cultivate in the hopes of leaving our bodies behind and ascending. If Jiang-zhangmen believes even the heavenly gods can err, why place your faith in cultivation at all?”

This faction was too large, all of them fired up as they spoke in defense of Tianyin Pavilion, left behind by the God of Justice. In the end, though his face went pale with anger, there was nothing Jiang Xi could do. The matter was left unsettled.

But a paper shield could never hide a fire, and the truth would always out. Far from resolving the chaos in the cultivation realm, the scattering of Sisheng Peak seemed to worsen it. A riot started in Sichuan three days later.

The first spark to catch was Wuchang Town. A group of commoners dressed in white mourning clothes traveled to Tianyin Pavilion to make their grievances known.

“When has Sisheng Peak ever stolen children?”

“Where did Tianyin Pavilion find those beasts that spoke against them?! How dare they accuse Sisheng Peak! How can they live with themselves?!”

“Cultivation this, cultivation that—have you been doing it blind this whole time? Wuchang Town sits right at the foot of the mountain. You marched up there for ‘justice,’ but you didn’t dare seek it in our own court? Why did you put together that herd of heartless traitors, those ungrateful cowards, if not to give yourself an excuse—a chance to act on your own cruelty?! You’re all *murderers*!”

“Exonerate Xue-zhangmen!”

Those among the petitioners who’d originally lived in the upper cultivation realm and been rescued during the apocalyptic fire in Linyi wept hardest, their faces masks of fury. “Framing the innocent,” they

howled. “Scheming and lying—you’re not human! You’re beasts! Monsters!”

One cultivator couldn’t hold his tongue a minute longer. Putting a hand to the hilt of his sword, he shouted, “Enough! Tianyin Pavilion was founded by the gods themselves. How dare you speak this way—aren’t you afraid you’ll go to hell?”

The crowd fell silent—but it was only a moment before a storyteller took up his paper fan and jabbed it at the doors of Tianyin Pavilion. “Go to hell?” He snorted. “Xianjun, listen up.” He cleared his throat and proclaimed for the world to hear, “Tianyin Pavilion is no more than a glorified pigsty!”

Everyone burst into laughter, clapping their hands in delight. One young master said, sighing in admiration, “Xiansheng, in all the years you’ve been telling tales, this is the most exciting one I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s right! Tianyin Pavilion is a glorified pigsty!”

As the shouts rose in wave after wave, the cultivator’s face twisted. He couldn’t beat them up, nor could he curse them out; he froze, then swept his sleeves and left.

The mob at the gates was composed entirely of commoners with no spiritual energy; Tianyin Pavilion thought nothing of it and let them shout themselves hoarse. Yet they hadn’t expected so many to join them from all corners of the land. On the second day, one of the disciples in the pavilion master’s inner circle broke and brought the matter up to Mu Yanli.

“Pavilion Master, the square is full of commoners here to speak on behalf of Sisheng Peak. Do you think we ought to say something?”

Mu Yanli’s face was expressionless. “There’s no need. These people will grow bored after shouting a little and leave on their own.”

“But there’s already…” the disciple stammered, “a-at least a thousand people at the doors…”

Mu Yanli blinked. “A thousand?”

Pushing herself up from the rosewood chaise, she stepped over plush fur rugs to reach the window, its frame carved with flowers. She looked down: The square in front of Tianyin Pavilion was a sea of white. Dressed in their white hemp mourning clothes, those commoners had gathered—some on their feet shouting curses, others seated quietly on the ground—so determined it seemed they’d be content to grow roots right there before the gates.

A furrow appeared between Mu Yanli’s brows. Nearby, the same

disciple asked carefully, “It’s been two days, but no one has left. The crowd has only grown—people from all the towns and villages of Sichuan have begun to arrive. If this continues, the matter of the false witnesses will get out.”

At Mu Yanli’s continued silence, the disciple pressed, “Pavilion Master, what should we do?”

Mu Yanli pursed her lips; before she could reply, a voice as smooth as jade rang out from behind her. “Let it.”

The bead veil tinkled, and Shi Mei sauntered in. The disciple hastily dipped his head. “Senior Sage.”

Mu Yanli turned with a frown. “What are you doing here? I thought you were standing guard over Taxian-jun.”

“The core fragments have merged into his heart, but he won’t wake for a while yet.” Shi Mei went to the window and glanced down. “What a large group. They must have quite a lot of time on their hands.”

“Sarcasm, at a time like this?” Mu Yanli’s brow was creased with concern. “Right now, all that’s keeping them from rioting is the popular faith in Tianyin Pavilion, but who knows how long that will last? There are many fools among the cultivators of the other sects, but they are not *all* fools. If these commoners keep making a racket, I’m afraid some accident will occur even before Taxian-jun wakes up.”

Shi Mei smiled. “Don’t worry, Mu-jiejie. Not even the biggest accident could shake Tianyin Pavilion’s position.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those cultivators pursue their path with the goal of ascending. They can’t possibly insult the descendants of gods while here on earth. Honestly, did they *really* not know whether Sisheng Peak was guilty? Could they really not tell whether or not those witnesses were telling the truth?”

When Mu Yanli didn’t answer, Shi Mei continued. “They chose to believe it because they feared Sisheng Peak, and they feared Mo Ran’s Zhenlong Chess Formation. *They* wanted to eliminate this sect, so they put their trust in a mere few dozen testimonies.” Shi Mei laid his hands on the windowsill, his voice feather-light. “They knew what they were doing.”

“B-but,” the disciple responded, “we can’t just let these commoners say whatever they want. We have to address it somehow, don’t we?”

“That’s why I said just let the matter get out.”

“What are you saying?” asked Mu Yanli.

“Be more decisive. Chase them off.”

“Tianyin Pavilion has never censored frank speech, nor do we turn people away without reason. Dispersing them will draw the sects’ condemnation,” said Mu Yanli.

Shi Mei didn’t care. “Did I not just explain? Deep down, they already know the truth. They’re not going to rise up and revolt anytime soon. By the time things come to a head, our Taxian-jun will be awake. I’m sure you know what that means.”

Mu Yanli swallowed back what she was about to say, appearing conflicted. She closed her eyes and turned to her disciple. “Send them away.”

That loyal disciple left, leaving only Mu Yanli and Shi Mingjing in the room. They stood at the window, side by side, watching the goings-on below.

A row of Tianyin Pavilion disciples filed out, their clothes and crowns of white gold sparkling in the sunlight. When the commoners in their coarse white hemp saw them emerge, they thought they’d finally get an explanation. Those who were sitting rose to their feet, and they clustered around the disciples.

Though they were too far away to hear what the disciples said, Shi Mei and Mu Yanli had a clear view of the fury that appeared on the listener’s faces. Suddenly, one of them grabbed a disciple and slapped them soundly across the face.

Chaos broke out below.

Mu Yanli’s eyes widened. The tide of people pushed and shoved, raining blows upon the dozen or so disciples caught in their midst. How could this be allowed to continue? Mu Yanli was stoic, yes, but not so much that she’d watch her own disciples beaten and reviled in public without lifting a hand. She moved to open the window and call out to the disciples that they could use magic for self-defense, but found her hand caught in a firm grip.

“Let them fight,” said Shi Mei.

“Tianyin Pavilion prohibits cultivators from striking back at commoners unless given explicit permission. Any fight is a risk—if I let this go on, their lives may be in danger.”

“Let one die,” said Shi Mei peaceably.

Mu Yanli stared in shock.

Fury would strip people of their rationality, especially a mob

this large ganging up on a lesser party. They wouldn't hold themselves back.

Very soon, Mu Yanli saw the crowd freeze. They slowly parted around one of Tianyin Pavilion's newest disciples—so new Mu Yanli couldn't remember the man's name. He lay on the ground in an ever-growing pool of blood.

Shi Mei released Mu Yanli's hand. "Look, now you have an excuse to stamp out these ants. Strike away."

The hardest thing about crushing resistance was finding an appropriate excuse. Once the excuse was found, violence and oppression became as easy as breathing.

The doors of Tianyin Pavilion crashed open and disciples poured out, all of them armed and shielded as they charged toward the defenseless commoners. The square descended instantly into madness. The disciples cut through the mob, dividing the crowd up before bringing their swords down for the slaughter. Shouts of condemnation, screams, and furious howling all melded into one cacophonous roar. The commoners ran, shouted, and attempted to band together for protection, but none turned to flee.

"Cease this at once," a disciple bellowed, "or don't accuse Tianyin Pavilion of being heartless!"

"When has Tianyin Pavilion ever possessed a heart?" An old man's quavering voice cut through the noise of the crowd. The chief of Yuliang Village had come too. "This old man came here for justice. Even if I die here today, I won't regret it!"

The village girl Ling-er was enraged and heartbroken. She stood with all her relatives from the village, refusing to fall back so much as a step. "Kill us all then! Will you dare kill everyone in Sichuan to silence us?!"

Tianyin Pavilion's best fighter, leading the disciples' charge, clenched his jaw. "A herd of ingrates lining up to die." Those behind him closed their ranks, hands sparking with spells.

Yet before they could hurl them, an arrow screamed through the air, slamming into the ground with a burst golden light. A brilliant yellow barrier shimmered into existence between the two sides.

"Who the hell—?!" the Tianyin fighter snarled.

A beam of white light shot upward, piercing the clouds in a blink and streaking up through the heavens. Within this tremendous flow of spiritual energy, a dashing young cultivator leapt down from the sky and stood icily in front of the Sichuan commoners with her

bow held before her, wreathed in wind and smoke. Behind her, a faewolf the height of two men stood facing the wind, white of fur and gold of claw, eyes scarlet as he bared his teeth and growled.

Shi Mei narrowed his eyes. “Ye Wangxi…”

Ye Wangxi quickly put aside her bow and summoned her sword. She stood alone, whipped by the wind, her beautiful eyes fierce and determined.

“You again?!” Someone from Tianyin Pavilion recognized her and glared. “Leftover scum of Rufeng Sect.”

Without a word, Ye Wangxi took a step forward.

“I knew you were trouble when you insisted on bringing Mo Ran water!” the Tianyin Pavilion disciple continued. “You were on Mo Ran’s side the whole time! Just another villain!”

Ye Wangxi’s sword sang from its sheath like flowing water. She narrowed her eyes. “I believe we both know who the real villain is. But there is one thing you were right about.” She paused. “Ye Wangxi stands with Mo-zongshi.”

That disciple scoffed. “Ye Wangxi, don’t tell me a woman like you wants to fight us on your own?”

She was already furious about what had happened to Sisheng Peak; flames leapt from her eyes as she slammed her sword down in front of her. That overpowering spiritual energy plunged the sword—not a holy weapon, but merely an ordinary blade—deep into the stone, a long crack snaking out across the ground. She gritted her teeth. “I’ve had it with the lot of you. Stop saying *woman* this and *woman* that all the damn time!”

Ye Wangxi had almost always been humble and conciliatory in front of the cultivation world. This was the first time anyone had ever seen her rage.

“Listen up.” Every inch of Ye Wangxi’s body was wound tight. She stared at those men like a hunting panther, yielding not an inch. “Sisheng Peak treated Rufeng Sect with dignity in our darkest hour and brought the people of Linyi safely out of the inferno. Now, even if Sisheng Peak is gone, as long as Ye Wangxi lives, these people will come to no harm!”

No one in Tianyin Pavilion had fought Ye Wangxi before; they had no idea of her true strength. Thinking her nothing more than a teary-eyed maiden clinging to her young master’s sleeve, they scoffed. “Little girl, do you know what you’re saying? You want to protect that flock of balding chickens by yourself? You really think you’re

something special—but do you have the skills to back it up?"

"Find out for yourself!"

She threw the sheath in her hand aside, metal flashing like frost. Ye Wangxi said no more: With a snap of her fingers and a long-legged leap, she landed astride the faewolf, as light as a swallow in flight. Leaning down, she wrenched her naked blade from the ground and charged at the disdainful Tianyin Pavilion cultivators.

At the window, Shi Mei placidly looked down at the chaos below, his pale lips parting as he snorted. "I never thought I'd get to see the goddess of war from the past life again. To think she'd still be forced down this path after everything."

"Goddess of war?"

Shi Mei was silent a moment, looking down on Ye Wangxi with both pity and scorn. "Jiejie, look. In life, you might experience all sorts of twists and turns. You might set out in a hundred different directions, but you always end up at the same place. Who she was in the past life is not something she'll be able to escape in this one."

Blood sprayed and sparks flew. The cries of slaughter soared into the skies; Ye Wangxi fought alone, weaving between clashing sword glares, keeping the crowd of commoners shielded behind her barrier.

This woman was clad in black martial robes, her waist slender and her legs long. When she wielded her sword, she was Ye Wangxi. But Naobaijin fought seamlessly by her side, and Madam Rong's embroidered quiver swayed at her belt. When she drew her bow, she was also Nangong Si.

She'd experienced much more in this life than the last. She'd been helpless and lost, yet she'd also had those fleeting moments when the storm clouds had cleared. The evening Nangong Si gave her the jade pendant atop Naihe Bridge, the sunset had been beautiful. She'd thought she could put down her sword and become once more the gentle girl who could cry and laugh as she liked.

But Nangong Si had died. He went without warning, and before he did, he told Ye Wangxi as she stayed behind to hold off their enemies, *It's too dark here; I know you don't like it. I'll come back as soon as I can.* But he never did.

Just as she had in the past life, Ye Wangxi lost her weakness, and also her armor. She slowly absorbed what remained of those tender feelings and gradually accepted this lonely, grieving version of herself. In her heart, she silently gave herself two funerals. Elder Xu's death had taken Little Ye-zi with him. With her own hands, she buried her yifu and those days of sunny youth. Nangong Si's death had taken

Miss Ye to the grave. She personally snuffed out the lantern that'd burned through rainy nights.[6]

The god of war sealed the grave of the girl and of the woman. She'd returned to Tianyin Pavilion as a lone fighter, to battle the cultivators with her sword in hand.

Shi Mei looked down at the fray, then turned to Mu Yanli. "Send all of Tianyin Pavilion's best disciples out to meet her. This woman cannot be allowed to live."

Mu Yanli looked back at him in shock. "All of them? Sh-she's only one girl…"

"This one girl gave even Taxian-jun no end of trouble." Shi Mei smiled. "If you underestimate her now, you'll come to see her strength in the future."

The gates opened again, and the high-level disciples of Tianyin Pavilion streamed out. Ye Wangxi fought them off while maintaining the barrier at her back. The green crane ribbon of Rufeng Sect fluttered as she darted in and out. Mu Yanli had ordered her death, and so the disciples sought to kill her with every blow. One person couldn't possibly fight off such a horde, but Ye Wangxi gritted her teeth and refused to bow. With Naobaijin at her side, they weren't yet overpowered.

"Send more." Shi Mei looked down upon the scene as if watching fish in a pond. Scanning the battle below, he spoke placidly. "As many as you have to. Since she's come all this way, she won't be leaving here alive—"

"A-Nan, over there!" Mu Yanli cut him off.

Shi Mei's gaze followed hers to the horizon, where a cloud of silver and blue was thickening into a wide band across the sky.

The elders and disciples of Sisheng Peak had come.

The men and women Madam Wang had saved still wore the armor of Sisheng Peak, riding their gleaming silver swords as they swept in from the far reaches of the sky in a great mass. At their head were the Tanlang and Xuanji Elders, robes flaring in the wind like a scene from a painting. Behind them, hundreds of disciples bore down on Tianyin Pavilion in fury, their armor flashing in the sun.

"Is this how the so-called descendants of gods treat the weak and vulnerable?" the Xuanji Elder shouted.

The Tanlang Elder had a darker, more volatile temper. Keeping his brown eyes fixed on the scene beneath them, he didn't bother with quips or pleasantries. Three words expressed everything, his fury

made manifest: “Go to *hell*!”

Faced with these ferocious soldiers surging in like the roaring tide, Shi Mei’s expression darkened. The sharp curve of his lips could’ve been a smile, or a sneer. “What blighted fate. Every great battle must first start with a duel with Sisheng Peak’s people.”

He scanned the incoming wave of cultivators. Chu Wanning wasn’t among their number. Where had he and Mo Ran gone after he’d appeared on the sentencing grounds of Tianyin Pavilion? Mo Ran’s heart had been gouged too many times; it was unlikely he’d survived. But what of Chu Wanning? Was he standing vigil over Mo Ran’s freshly dug grave? Or had he decided to reenact the past life by dying with him?

Either option irritated Shi Mei. A faint unease stirred in his heart, and he turned from the window.

“Where are you going?” asked Mu Yanli, worried.

“To check on Taxian-jun.” Shi Mei paused. “I’ll think of something to help him wake faster. Once he’s awake, the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death will open once more. Then no one will be able to stop us.”

Slender fingers brushed over the Tianyin Pavilion talisman on the door. The entrance to the secret chamber rumbled open, and Shi Mei took the long steps down along the pathway carved with ancient sigils, through three entrance barriers, and at last arrived in the depths of a stone room.

A thin layer of ice crunched beneath his feet, and fog drifted through the air. A piece of jade inlaid on the blue-gray ceiling gave off a pristine glow. Beneath it, a freezing crystal coffin lay. Shi Mei came to a stop beside it, bending to study the man within.

“Taxian-jun, Mo Weiyu…” he murmured, eyes fixed on the light array on the man’s chest. “You’ve slept for so long—isn’t it time you awoke?”

There was no reaction from the man in the coffin. Taxian-jun lay with his eyes closed and his lips bloodless.

“Your spiritual flow is unstable.” Shi Mei placed his hand on Taxian-jun’s brow, scanning it carefully. He stared, thoughtful, at that handsome face. “Having a bad dream?”

The sleeping man naturally supplied no answer.

Eyes gentle, Shi Mei brushed a wisp of hair from Taxian-jun’s forehead. It was like he was gazing upon a godly weapon, soon to be complete. “It might be your own spiritual core, but such things are

bound up with the heart. I'm sure the merging can't be comfortable."

His whisper was enchanted, hypnotic. "Taxian-jun, don't believe anything you see in your dream. It's all fake… Come, wake up. Once you're awake, you'll have everything."

Shi Mei bent lower, his lips almost brushing the sleeping man's ear, voice sibilant and syrupy. "Be it Shi Mingjing, Chu Wanning—even your dead mother…they'll all come back. Wake up," he breathed to the sleeping emperor. "I'm waiting."

Chapter 288:
The Zongshi and the Emperor

IN THE DREAM, Taxian-jun opened his eyes to find himself standing in the middle of an endless plain. The clouds overhead were crimson, so low they seemed within reach; he was surrounded by lush reeds and willow fuzz, rising and falling in the breeze. Human voices echoed through them, some laughing, some weeping. The sound was as soft as gauze slipping through one's fingers, or the brush of flowing water.

He walked forward, startling the deep blue fireflies from within the depths of the reeds. The great band of a river flowed sluggishly past his feet, larger and wider than any he'd seen. He glimpsed boats floating on its surface in the distance, and the song of the ferrymen echoed through the air.

"My body sinks into the abyss, my limbs reduced to paste. My head emptied of thought, my tears ground to dust. Feed on my entrails, you scarlet insects; feast on my organs, you hovering vultures… Only the soul returns…only the soul returns…"

The past flowed by like water, leaving only the soul.

He felt he had been here before—but when? Taxian-jun looked around. The scenery seemed so familiar, yet no matter how he cast his mind back, he couldn't recall ever having seen it.

"Hey, you," came a voice behind him.

Taxian-jun whirled around but saw only the fireflies.

The voice was very faint, like snatches of a half-heard dream. "Walk a little farther. I'm right there."

Despite his distaste for taking orders, Taxian-jun's curiosity got the better of him. Frowning, he walked into the reeds where those fireflies danced. He soon saw a ruined mill, its overgrown courtyard piled with rubble. In its center, upon a pitch-black grindstone, sat a man. His back was turned to Taxian-jun, and his face was turned to the sky.

"Who are you?"

The man didn't look back. He sighed. "I'm probably leaving soon."

"Leaving? Where are you going?" Taxian-jun didn't wait for a reply before asking in frustration, "Where are we?"

“You’re on the shore of the soul river. Do you see them out there? Take one of those bamboo boats and head downstream, and you’ll reach the underworld.”

Taxian-jun watched him in silence.

“It takes about eight years to get through the reincarnation queue, and at the gates there’s a guard with his intestines spilling out who will measure your merit in life. If your sins are too heavy, you’ll get sent right to the eighteen hells.” The man’s voice was light and easy; he spoke of the business of the dead as if reminiscing about the past.

“The first level is called Nanke Town. There’s a poor artist in there, but he shouldn’t be poor anymore. I burned a lot of paper money for him. There’s an old man selling wontons, and if you go in deeper, you’ll see a palace built by the Fourth Ghost King. Oh, and there’s also Tailwind Hall—”

“Blah blah blah.” Taxian-jun cut him off. “Get to the point.”

The man paused. “Taxian-jun, do you fear death?”

He scoffed. “What’s there to fear?”

“I used to think so too. Once, I chose to end myself with poison. I thought there was nothing more I wanted in life; that I didn’t fear death.” The man lowered his head. “But now, I don’t want to go. He’s still in the world—I can’t leave him.”

The man leapt lightly down from the grindstone, stepping out of the shadows and into the clear light of the moon. Wind ruffled the water at the banks of the soul river, willow fuzz flying into the air as the fireflies leapt and spun.

Taxian-jun’s expression shifted. “You?”

Mo Ran walked toward him, a hollow black hole in his chest where his heart should’ve been. His handsome features—the high bridge of his nose and the clean lines of his face—were relaxed: He looked little different from the first time Taxian-jun had seen him at Mount Jiao, other than the fact that he was now much calmer. All the fear and confusion had been wiped away.

“How are you still…”

“As you can see, I’m not. But for some reason, I’m a little different from the other dead. It’s been seven days since I passed, but no Hei Wuchang or Bai Wuchang[7] have come to take me to the underworld. I’ve been drifting around on the shores here this whole time.”

Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t worry. My spiritual core is inside your body; I can’t survive.” Mo Ran turned his face toward the rushing waters of the soul river. “But I don’t want to leave…” he murmured. “I want to go back.”

Blinking, Taxian-jun brought a hand to his own chest. A malevolent grin appeared on his face. “Your spiritual core is within this venerable one? So then…Hua Binan succeeded? He did it; this venerable one will be able to move around at will, this venerable one will—”

“Do you know who Hua Binan is?” Mo Ran turned, watching him quietly. He stepped up to Taxian-jun, then lifted one glowing, incorporeal finger and tapped him between the brows.

“Actually, there’s no point in telling you. He’s messed with your mind, and knowing him, he’d cut away anything that would stand in the way of his control of you. But since your cognizance soul remains, you should at least remember a little… Don’t let him use you so easily.”

For some reason, Taxian-jun felt a splitting pain where Mo Ran touched him. Scraps of memory flashed before his eyes. “What are you doing?!”

Mo Ran said nothing. He took Taxian-jun’s face in his hands, watching him quietly and a little sadly. “If only you could learn the whole truth.”

“You…”

“At least then, even if I have to leave, I’d feel better about it.”

Taxian-jun clenched his jaw. “What *truth*? What a load of shit! Unhand this venerable one!” Furious, he tried to struggle free of Mo Ran’s hold, but it was like beating cotton fluff. His spells and his limbs went right through his other self’s intangible body.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and sighed. “Honestly, I really do want you to see what I’ve been through since my rebirth. I want to give you all my memories. Maybe it’s because this fixation runs too deep that my soul hasn’t been taken away—maybe it’s so I could meet you here.”

He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to Taxian-jun’s brow. “Turn back,” he whispered. “Forgive yourself.”

Those murmurs sounded far too similar to Chu Wanning’s dying words—Taxian-jun flinched, but before he could unleash his fury, bloody crimson filled his vision. He saw the Heavenly Rift to the ghost realm once again. It was the calamity that had changed the trajectory of his life, a time when no one had spared a thought for him, when everyone’s pained cries had shaken the sky.

Taxian-jun seemed to flutter in midair like a paper kite. Laid out beneath him were the sobbing crowds and the bloody stink of broken limbs. He looked around—where was Shi Mei? Where had Shi Mei gone? He couldn’t find him, couldn’t see him. Anger scorched his heart, sending him spiraling into madness—and then he froze.

In the smoke of battle, a familiar silhouette was twitching on the ground. Taxian-jun descended and found, to his surprise, that it was

his own youthful self, unconscious and on the verge of death.

What had happened here?

As if in answer, his surroundings changed. Someone was hoisting his battered body onto their back and pitifully crawling out from that sea of blood and bone.

Who? Who did those torn and bloodied hands belong to? That person who refused to set him down even when they could hardly move, that person who dragged him to safety with everything they had—who was it?

Taxian-jun swept to the ground. He hovered around that pair of figures, staring at the man who carried him—that man covered in wounds, his face smeared in filth. Recognition came upon him like a clap of thunder.

"Chu Wanning…?"

But how could this be… *How could it be?!*

Someone seemed to be howling in his ear. The voice was distant, yet its fury slashed into him like a knife. "The stairs are still stained with a trail of blood; that's the road he took to bring you home!" they screamed.

The Discernment Barrier is twinned! Whatever damage you took, he suffered the same!

How could you say he didn't save you… How could you say he didn't save you…

Taxian-jun felt cold all over. His eyes flew open, revealing bloodshot whites. He stared at Mo Weiyu, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "What are you trying to show this venerable one?! That's…that's impossible!"

But the sight of Mo Ran's eyes startled him out of his furious rage. His other self was gazing back at him, his dark, placid eyes sheened with tears. "I've given you as many of my memories as I can."

"Who wants to know about you and him?! Who wants to know what's happened since your rebirth! You pathetic slug—you betrayed Shi Mei… You and this venerable one aren't alike at all!" Wrath flared in his chest. "Who asked you?! Get out of my way!"

The rage that had struck fear into so many hearts failed to stir anything in Mo Ran, who looked at him almost pityingly. He stood before Taxian-jun; a golden flame had lit the hems of his clothes, and his incorporeal body was slowly disappearing in the fire, scattering into motes of firefly light. "You don't have to shout. It's time for me to go. I've used the power of my soul to give you all my memories in

defiance of the natural order—I don't know what's going to happen to me now." Mo Ran paused, then grinned. "Maybe I'll be locked out of the Wheel of Reincarnation, or maybe I'll get sent right to the Infinite Hells."

Taxian-jun watched him in silence.

"Ah—but in the best-case scenario…maybe both my soul and my spiritual core will merge into your body."

Taxian-jun had listened to the rest with bored impatience, but this statement made him scowl. "Don't even think about it!"

Looking at him, Mo Ran's mouth curved in the hint of a smile. "Why—what are you afraid of?"

Considering this a grievous insult, Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes. "What does this venerable one have to fear? This body belongs to this venerable one—don't you dare try to usurp me!"

Mo Ran sighed. "There are certain truths you just can't bear to accept. I've already acknowledged them, but you still try to ignore them."

"Shut up!"

Mo Ran watched him peacefully. The patch of nothingness was spreading faster, eating up his waist and then his chest.

In the moments before he vanished, he reached out once more, almost brushing the hair at Taxian-jun's temples. As if threatened with some awful poison, Taxian-jun took a disdainful step back.

Mo Ran only smiled. The motes of golden light that had formed his body flew toward Taxian-jun's chest like moths seeking a flame, leaving only his face and one outstretched hand. Taxian-jun sensed a familiar strength reawakening inside him, searingly hot, like the flow of magma beneath stone. It was a strength he knew intimately yet despised utterly.

"Don't even *dream* of merging souls with this venerable one!"

"No one ever wants to leave. How could I not make one final attempt?"

Taxian-jun was snarling. "Get the hell out!"

Mo Ran gazed at him. "I'm sorry. Even at the very end, I have to fight you for this body."

Taxian-jun was silent, seething.

"If only you could return to who you were. Be Mo Weiyu, won't you?" The golden flame burned all the way to his fingertips, then swallowed that young and handsome face. "Don't be Taxian-jun

anymore.”

His voice faded with a whisper of ash.

In the secret chamber inside Tianyin Pavilion, a dazzling light exploded from the coffin. It was like the sun brought to earth, so blinding Shi Mei squinched his eyes shut and threw up his sleeve to shield his face. After what seemed like an eternity, the piercing light slowly faded.

Shi Mei had never seen anything like it. Paling, he flicked his sleeve aside and peered into the icy coffin, only to meet eyes so black they gleamed purple.

Taxian-jun slowly sat up. His cheeks were bone-white and cold, his lips still devoid of color. He resembled a statue of cold jade formed from some underwater spring. His robes, gold-embroidered black, emanated an icy mist; even the light shining upon him seemed somehow frozen. He reached out, pale and slender fingers resting upon the lip of the coffin, and looked around, his eyes coming to focus on Shi Mei.

Shi Mei was this creature’s master—but the eerie look in those eyes made him take an involuntary step back.

“You’re…” He swallowed, mastering himself with effort. “Finally awake.”

Taxian-jun said nothing. His expression was fiendish—even more cruelly unpredictable than it’d been in the past. He panted shallowly, his back soaked in cold sweat. Mo-zongshi’s final smile still flickered before his eyes. He closed them, trying to feel for an extraneous set of souls inside his body, but it was not something he could tell by feeling.

At the sight of his stormy expression, Shi Mei, standing beside him, swiftly reached out to put a hand on his forehead, muttering spells to settle Taxian-jun’s uneasy heart. After completing a few, Shi Mei stared into his face. “How do you feel?”

Taxian-jun didn’t reply. He put his hand out, wiggling his fingers experimentally. Those neatly trimmed nails were like still water, devoid of any vital flush. He got to his feet in the coffin. His first, rasping words were: “I dreamed quite a long dream.”

Shi Mei watched him warily. “It wasn’t real.”

Black robes billowed like clouds and golden thread gleamed like water as the emperor stepped out of his coffin, a darkness in his demeanor. “I thought so.”

He stared at Shi Mei, and Shi Mei returned his gaze. Shi Mei probed quietly, “Do you remember who you are?”

There was a short silence. That cruel and handsome man smiled faintly, his thin lips parting to bare his teeth. “How could I not. Taxian-jun, Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu.” He paused, dropping his eyes to the ground and giving the tense Shi Mei an insouciant bow. “Ready to serve my master.”

A flicker of joy passed through Shi Mei’s eyes, but he dared not relax just yet. He produced a crystal from his qiankun pouch, which shone with a queer, jade-green gleam—the strongest type of crystal used to test a cultivator’s spiritual energy. He swallowed, coming to stand before Taxian-jun and handing him the stone with barely concealed anticipation. “Can you light it up?”

Taxian-jun’s eyes swept coolly over it. “Of course,” he said easily. He tightened his grip on the little crystal, tendons protruding. When his powerful spiritual energy poured into the stone, it did more than glow. Fine fissures spread across its surface.

Shi Mei held his breath, staring at the crystal without blinking. With a loud *crack*, the green stone shattered in Taxian-jun’s grip. That formidable crystal had been reduced to dust—infinitesimal motes that streamed between his pale fingers.

“Was it supposed to be difficult?” Taxian-jun flicked the powder from his fingertips and sneered. “Fragile little thing.”

The tension melted from Shi Mei’s body. He took a few steps back and collapsed onto a nearby bench, utterly drained.

This…this was the world’s most powerful force. Had it finally returned to his control?

Shi Mei couldn’t help it. His trembling grew violent, the dim light in the stone chamber illuminating his impossibly beautiful face. Was it joy? Or relief? Shadows slid over his features, blurring them into a ghoulish mask. He buried his face in his hands. “Mother, do you see?” he murmured. “I did it.”

He jolted to his feet, near hysterical, shouting madly at those blank walls in the stone room that held no one but himself and Taxian-jun. “Do you see this?! Soon! Do you all see?!”

No one replied. In that silent chamber, he began to laugh so hard tears streamed down his cheeks.

Golden tears—like the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast Song Qiutong.

Chapter 289:
Half But Ghosts

THE NIGHTMARE that had beset the cultivation realm seemed to never end. Attacks from Zhenlong pawns came one after another, and the cultivator behind them was thought to be a lunatic, taking victims indiscriminately. From graying seniors to infant children, all would fall under their sway. They'd cast such a wide net that no one could guess where their true goal lay.

Some came to beg Tianyin Pavilion for help, but the pavilion master declined to appear, claiming illness. Even when refugees starved to death at their gates, the doors remained shut. Slowly, many finally—and with great reluctance—realized that perhaps they'd been wrong from the start.

But by now it was far too late.

Mo-zongshi was dead, and Chu Wanning's whereabouts were unknown. Sisheng Peak had fallen, and the great sects had their hands full within their own territories. More and more mindless Zhenlong pawns wandered the realm, killing people and setting fire to their homes. The violence spread like a wildfire on a parched plain, swallowing the entire cultivation realm at a blinding pace. From Jiangdu and Yangzhou in the east, to Sichuan in the west, all the way down to Leizhou in the south…beautiful buildings and warships alike creaked their laments within the inferno and collapsed in on themselves. Great swaths of the mortal world's beauty solemnly blackened to char in this apocalyptic inferno.

Atop the Star-Viewing Terrace in Tianyin Pavilion, Shi Mei gazed out at the chaos both distant and near. He stood alone for a while before he heard footsteps behind him.

A woman's silk shoes creaked over a thin layer of snow, and hands draped a cloak around Shi Mei's shoulders. Mu Yanli asked, "Where's Taxian-jun?"

"He left this morning."

"You've sent him out already?" Mu Yanli was stunned. "Why so soon?"

"There's no reason to wait. Everything is ready; all that remains is to choose the right moment. It's up to him." It took a long beat for Shi Mei to speak again, a tremor in his usually controlled voice.

“Jiejie,” he mumbled. “It’s been so many years. Two lifetimes. I’ve finally done it…”

Mu Yanli turned and saw the gleam of tears in his peach-blossom eyes. Whether they were tears of excitement or sorrow, she didn’t know.

Shi Mei closed his eyes, forcing himself still. “Let’s go. The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death will open soon. We’ll bring all our pawns across.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

“But that’s so many…” Mu Yanli’s face was pale, but when she caught sight of Shi Mei’s pained, hungry expression, she stiffened her resolve. “All right. I understand.”

She turned to leave. Yet as she stepped out of the terrace, Shi Mei called out, “Wait!”

Mu Yanli looked back. Backlit by the setting sun, Shi Mei watched her, the wind buffeting his cloak. He seemed to have more to say, but even after the rims of his eyes went red, no words emerged.

At length, Mu Yanli broke the silence. “Don’t worry. No amount of cruelty would make me betray you.”

Shi Mei closed his eyes. Perhaps anyone, at such a significant moment, would become sensitive and fragile. His voice shook. “Even my other self from this lifetime betrayed me…”

“He didn’t betray only you,” said Mu Yanli. “He betrayed the entire Butterfly-Boned tribe; he betrayed every one of us. He refused to continue staining his hands with cultivators’ blood—but in doing so, he sentenced us to hell.”

Shi Mei said nothing.

“I understand why you did what you did,” said Mu Yanli. “A-Nan, it doesn’t matter what the world says about you. Among the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast tribe, you are a hero.”

She left.

Shi Mei watched her go. He turned, placing his fine-boned hands on the intricately carved railing and letting the coolness seep all the way into his heart.

“A hero?” He cast his eyes up to the dark clouds overhead, sighing. “There’s no hope of that anymore. No hero has ever taken so many lives.”

Sadness flashed in his eyes, but the emotion was swiftly erased.

“I’ve done all I can across two lifetimes, battling heaven and earth against the designs of fate. Now, both these forbidden techniques—the Space-Time Gate and the Zhenlong Chess Formation—lie within my grasp. No one on earth can stop me. Forget becoming a hero. I just want a way out.”

His knuckles were white on the railing, his last three words swallowed up by the wind: “For us all.”

A black silhouette swept through the snowy haze of Kunlun.

The snowstorm scraped his cheeks like blades, but he narrowed those purple-black eyes as if he couldn’t feel the cold. He soared through these skies like one of the mountain’s cliffside vultures, nimbly leaping up onto the green tiles of the sect’s rooftops. There were many formidable fighters on patrol at Kunlun Taxue Palace, but none noticed his arrival. He walked over the snow without leaving a single print.

The man swiftly made his way to the highest point in Taxue Palace. From there, he could look down at Heavenly Lake in the snow, surrounded by the hazy stillness and spreading fog.

That bolt of black lightning came to a stop. He stood atop Kunlun, as straight as the blade of a dagger. His black eyes remained fixed on Heavenly Lake. The howling gale flung back his hood, revealing the bloodless face of Emperor Taxian-jun.

He’d endured yet another round of Shi Mei’s tempering: Now in possession of Mo-zongshi’s spiritual core, he’d regained the power he once had and no longer disobeyed his master’s commands. He’d finally become a weapon with which Shi Mingjing was satisfied, a bottomless wellspring of spiritual energy.

But ever since he’d awoken at Tianyin Pavilion, certain scraps of memory flitted through his mind. He’d always been certain he hated Chu Wanning and loved Shi Mingjing, that the fullness of his anger and adoration were linked to each of them respectively. Yet slowly, he was coming to realize this wasn’t the case. He heard hazy voices and saw blurry scenes: Chu Wanning carefully folding wontons in Mengpo Hall; himself pleading, *Shizun, let’s start over from the beginning, okay? Please, pay attention to me, won’t you…*

He saw the full moon shining down over the ocean and into two people’s hearts. He saw himself holding Chu Wanning’s hand, while Chu Wanning looked down at his lap. Impossibly, those sharp phoenix eyes were red and wet at the corners. He heard Chu Wanning telling him, *I’m no good. Nobody’s ever liked me.*

He saw their passionate tryst at the inn. The storm raged outside, but it had nothing to do with them. He saw Chu Wanning inside the Red Lotus Pavilion, Chu Wanning looking up at him—

His heart pounded. Taxian-jun's eyes flew open. What was this?

He saw Chu Wanning looking so gently up at him—a tenderness in his eyes that no drug, torment, imprisonment, humiliation, or his own ceaseless wheedling had ever earned him. Taxian-jun's head pounded. He reached up to rub at his temples, sunlight flashing on the thorns of his vambraces. He cursed. "What the hell?"

Standing on the ridge of the roof, he sank into thought. The snows of Kunlun flurried down, and his shoulders were soon coated in slush—but for some reason, in the depths of his heart, he found it as peaceful as the sweetest dream. Somehow, in this dream, the sight of Chu Wanning's gentle eyes soothed him.

"This venerable one must be going insane." He blinked, pushing those absurd visions out of his mind and continuing forward.

His master had ordered him to find the place with the strongest spiritual energy in Kunlun and fully open the Space-Time Gate to the past life. He should've gone north. But when he saw Heavenly Lake, he turned the other way.

Here, he'd forever lost Chu Wanning.

Taxian-jun stood in place for a moment, resisting his urges, then struck out for the lake as if possessed.

Just as he was about to leap over the colonnade that encircled Taxue Palace, he heard a familiar voice.

"Dad… Mom…"

Too familiar. He froze, hiding himself in the shadows, only his pitch-black eyes peering downward. When he got a clear look, he guffawed. "I wondered who it was. So it's you."

In the courtyard below was a lone Xue Meng. He clutched a jug of wine, sprawled over the table and stinking drunk.

"This venerable one didn't kill your parents this time." Taxian-jun stroked his own chin, relishing the sight of Xue Meng so downtrodden. "But this venerable one is only too pleased to see you upset. I haven't forgotten who dug a hole in my chest all those years ago. How do you like it? Does your heart ache?"

The courtyard was silent. No one else was there.

Taxian-jun stared down for a beat longer. Struck by a whim, that black shadow fluttered down and landed before Xue Meng. The

intoxicated phoenix didn't register his arrival. He caressed the jug of wine, then tipped it back to pour more into his mouth.

An icy hand reached out and grabbed the red clay jug, stopping him.

"Who…?"

"Take a guess."

Xue Meng squinted through one puffy eye, red with tears. Slowly, that eye followed the hand up to Emperor Taxian-jun's handsome, mocking face.

Taxian-jun had never seen Xue Meng so defeated. Xue Meng from the past life must've surely broken down like this on many occasions where no one could see, but Taxian-jun was witnessing it with his own eyes for the first time. He licked his lips, savoring the thrill. Bending down, he stared at Xue Meng like a predator eyeing its prey. "How interesting. So even Chu Wanning's pet disciple will drown his sorrows in wine and lie here in a drunken heap."

He sat down sideways by the stone table's edge and reached out to tilt Xue Meng's face to the light. "It's been a while since I've seen you at this age." A rueful note crept into his voice. "This venerable one's been in that other world too long—I nearly forgot what a proud and haughty face you had when you were young."

His fingers slid from his cheeks to his nose, his brow, then prodded him on the forehead. "Xue Meng, did you know? There's something this venerable one regrets very much."

He stared into Xue Meng's glassy eyes, and a chilling smile crept across his face. "In the last life, this venerable one spared you in a moment of mercy—but then you turned around and tried to kill me. Often, this venerable one wondered if it wouldn't have been better to kill you at the start. Ah, honestly, the living are never truly at ease, and the dead aren't exactly suffering." Taxian-jun's voice was a low and threatening murmur. "Xue Meng, do you want to join your mom and dad?"

He leaned forward. His icy breath brushed Xue Meng's cheek, and two freezing fingers came to rest on the artery pulsing at the side of Xue Meng's throat. Taxian-jun's eyes never left Xue Meng's. He stared at his own reflection in those hazy, tear-filled pools, the image of a ghost returned to earth.

"Everyone in this world will die eventually." Taxian-jun bared his white teeth. "And we were brothers half our lives, were we not? Since I've run into you here, this venerable one might as well help you on your way. Set you free."

As he tightened his grip in preparation to kill, he heard a murmur, soft as a seedling sprouting from the earth. “Ge…”

Taxian-jun froze. Xue Meng gazed at him, so drunk it seemed he’d only just recognized the man in front of him. His tears fell like rain as he sobbed, staggering to his feet and grabbing Taxian-jun’s ice-cold arm as if it was driftwood upon a stormy sea. “Ge…”

Of course he wouldn’t notice the minute differences between the Mo Ran of the past life and that of the current world. He only knew that this was Mo Ran, his brother, his family, the return of his carefree youth.

The words finally sank in. Taxian-jun was sure he hadn’t misheard. Stunned, he didn’t know what expression to put on. A scene flickered through his dazed mind: himself and Xue Meng, sitting in the Red Lotus Pavilion, toasting each other with wine and tea beneath the moonlight.

Was this yet another thing Mo-zongshi had done?

“Ge.” Xue Meng burrowed into Taxian-jun’s arms, eyes wet and unfocused. He initially tried to hold back his tears but eventually started stammering and sobbing, gasping out the words between bouts of crying: “Don’t go… Don’t leave me here alone.” Then his focus seemed to go inward, and he began to shake, speaking through bloodless lips. “Don’t kill my dad; don’t force them… I was the one who killed those people—don’t hurt my parents, hurt me instead…” Great, fat tears slipped from his chin to dampen Taxian-jun’s lapels. “Don’t…don’t cut out my ge’s heart…”

Amidst his nonsensical weeping, Taxian-jun slowly lowered the hand that would’ve choked Xue Meng to death. He stood stiffly, wanting to push Xue Meng aside—but Xue Meng held him so tight, in such a brotherly embrace. Slowly, his tears soaked the fabric over his chest, just above his heart.

When he extricated himself at last, Taxian-jun practically fled back onto the roof. He lay atop the colonnade, carefully out of sight, and watched Xue Meng, curled up and sobbing in the snow.

In his memories, Xue Meng had always been cruel and haughty, with a sharp and cutting tongue—but the young man abandoned in this snowstorm was merely a boy who couldn’t find his gege anymore.

He watched Xue Meng cry for a very long time. At length, Xue Meng rose to his feet, either sobered up or exhausted, and stood blankly in the courtyard. Clutching his jug of wine, he stumbled toward the plum-blossom trees in the courtyard. He wandered aimlessly, his expression lost, and slowly dwindled into the distance.

Taxian-jun looked at the mess of footprints left in the snow, left by someone who never turned around. He watched as they marked a path into the depths of the storm, until he lost sight of Xue Meng's retreating silhouette.

Mournful singing drifted over the wind. It was a Sichuan song Xue Zhengyong had sung when he was alive. Now it came from Xue Meng's throat, echoing over the snowy Kunlun Taxue Palace.

"Greeting old friends, half but ghosts, meeting only in cups of wine." That voice still held a youthful clarity, but its tones were heavy with weariness. "Beneath the osmanthus tree hides a pot of wine, a drink shared between timeworn faces and streaks of white."

The snow left fingers of white in the young man's dark hair. His hoarse singing was accompanied by the wail of the wind, two torn and tattered cries.

"The first light of dawn shatters the dream, all depart…" The song was fading out, growing distant. Or maybe Xue Meng hadn't gone far at all; maybe his voice had gone soft, his breath swallowed by sobs. "Leaving me alone with my aged tears."

Leaving me alone with my aged tears.

At the age of twenty-two, he could only see his old friends smiling together again in drunken dreams. He was in the best years of his youth, yet he relied on the aid of a jug of wine to see the parents and friends he yearned for.

Xue Meng tipped his face up, as if trying to keep more tears from spilling. He couldn't tell if he succeeded—the storm blinded him. He closed his eyes, crying out so loudly his song echoed among the clouds. He seemed to be interrogating the heavens themselves, making demands of the earth under his feet. "I'd give what remains of my life to the God of Dreams, if only to call you back, cup after cup!"

Beneath the gathering clouds, he smashed his jug on the ground.

Xue Meng let himself fall into the snow, his arms spread wide. He didn't want to go any farther. What was ahead of him, anyway? He was surrounded by ice and snow, bereft of anyone he knew, stripped of his home. Even the Mo Ran he'd dreamed of just now was fake, a mirage that had disappeared in the next blink.

He lay unmoving in the snow. After a beat, he reached out and covered his eyes. Those bloodless lips parted, hot tears sliding down his temples. "Why did you leave me behind?" He sobbed, voice cracking. "*Why*… Why did you leave me here…?"

In both lifetimes, Xue Meng had been left alone.

Taxian-jun listened as those last words were drowned by the storm, staring in the direction in which Xue Meng had gone. He stood on the rooftop, completely still, the gale whipping through his cloak. He reached up and touched his chest, unsure what he was feeling.

Greeting old friends, half but ghosts.

It was true for Xue Meng now, but when had it ever been false for Taxian-jun? In the past life, Wushan Palace had been emptied, leaving him alone. No one remained; he couldn't remember where he'd left the censer in his room, nor wear those old clothes from his youth. Sometimes, he'd blurt a joke from his student days, but the faces around him were respectful and tense; no one knew what he was talking about. No one understood him. All who could were dead or gone.

Taxian-jun made his way slowly to the Heavenly Lake. White fog filled up the skies, and snow gathered in drifts on the lake's surface. He stood unmoving, like a statue that had no heart and felt no chill, and let the snow cover him.

"Chu Wanning," he whispered. "If, back then…"

If…what? He didn't continue. His lashes fluttered as he closed his eyes. For him there was no such thing as the past. He was Emperor Taxian-jun, the highest lord of the cultivation realm. He didn't know regret; he never thought of turning back. What was done was done. He would speak not of repentance nor defeat. It didn't matter if his body was ruined or all his kin forsook him—this was the road he'd chosen. He would press on despite all the thorny brambles that blocked his way.

But here, surrounded by endless horizon, beneath the vast and snowy skies where no one would see or know, Taxian-jun stood for a long time, his hands behind his back. Then he did something unimaginable: He sank to his knees and kowtowed, in that place where Chu Wanning had died in battle.

Once, twice, a third time.

Taxian-jun raised his head. Beneath his hood, frost had rimed his lashes. His expression was solemn, unreadable. He rose, as if having accomplished something he'd wanted to do for a very long time. With a snap of his black cloak, he swept silently to the point of greatest spiritual energy on Mount Kunlun.

When the emperor moved, no one could stop him. Shi Mingjing had chosen very well indeed: He was the most powerful spiritual force in the world, possessed of unmatched strength and cultivation.

The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death would open today.

Chapter 290:
Twinned Plum Blossoms

XUE MENG SANK into the snow. He had never been able to hold his liquor, and he had no idea he'd just met the most dangerous man in the world. He lay perfectly still, the pristine snowfall from the peaks of Kunlun falling over him like springtime willow fuzz or autumn's reed flowers.

Some time later, a man holding a crimson umbrella walked toward him through the snow. Squinting, Xue Meng caught sight of a familiar cool visage. "Mei…" mumbled Xue Meng. He was too tired to form the syllables of *Hanxue*.

"Mn, it's me." Mei Hanxue helped him up in silence.

Xue Meng sagged against Mei Hanxue's shoulder but didn't move his feet. "Got any wine?"

"No."

Xue Meng pretended not to have heard. "Sure, okay—then you'll drink with me?"

"No."

After a beat, Xue Meng burst into laughter. "You asshole. When I wouldn't drink, you forced it down my throat, and now that I will, you tell me you have none. Is this a joke?"

"I don't drink."

Mumbling something rude under his breath, Xue Meng shoved Mei Hanxue aside and hobbled into the flurrying snow. Holding his umbrella, Mei Hanxue watched his stooped figure. He didn't follow. "Where are you going?"

Xue Meng didn't know either. He wished only for more wine, to drink himself dead.

"Come back," said Mei Hanxue. "There's no path that way."

Xue Meng froze. He held himself still for a moment, then burst into tears. "I just want some fucking wine! And you won't let me have any! On top of that, now you're lying to me, saying you don't drink! What's your problem?!"

"…I'm not lying."

Xue Meng ignored him. "What's your *problem*, seriously?" he shouted. "Can't you tell I'm in a shitty fucking mood?!"

“I can.”

Feeling even worse, Xue Meng blinked. The tip of his nose was red. “I see… But you won’t drink with me? Do you think I’m going to drink up all your wine and not pay you back? Let me tell you, I’m not as broke as you think.”

Still mumbling, he started digging through his pockets. After collecting a little pile of random coppers, he counted them over, his face falling as he did. “Huh, where did the rest of them go?”

Mei Hanxue put a hand to his forehead, exasperated. “Xue Meng, you’re drunk. Go back and rest.”

Before Xue Meng could answer, he heard the soft press of footsteps through the snow. Another gentle voice rang out. “Dage, why are you trying to reason with a drunk?” A silk-gloved hand holding a lambskin flask reached over his shoulder, silver tinkling on that outstretched wrist. Mei Hanxue canted a look along the intruding arm and turned.

Standing behind him was his mirror image, only with a gentler cast to his features and a spark of mirth in his eyes.

“There’re only two ways to deal with drunks.” The man beamed. “Let them drink until they pass out, or beat them unconscious.”

Mei Hanxue leveled him with a dubious look.

The newcomer batted his lashes. “I know Dage doesn’t drink. Go home. I’ll drink with him.”

Faint gray smoke spiraled languorously into the air, softly tender and hardly tangible.

The rooms belonging to the da-shixiong of Taxue Palace were redolent of expensive ambergris and densely carpeted in pristine white furs, the pelts so thick that anyone, stepping in, would sink up to their ankles. Gossamer layers of drapery blurred the line between night and day. Any breeze would lift the delicate drapes, but in its absence, they hung low, veiling what lay beyond.

Mei Hanxue lay on those thick white furs with his feet bare and his chin resting on one hand. His pale toes curled languidly as he lifted jade-green eyes to watch Xue Meng, who sat cross-legged before him gulping down wine.

After a few cups, Mei Hanxue smiled. “Ziming, aren’t you shocked?”

“About what?”

“There’re two of me.”

“…Oh,” was Xue Meng’s only reply.

Mei Hanxue shook his head. “I forgot what a lightweight you are. This far gone, your brain’s not working anymore. Nothing’s going to shock you now.”

“Hmph.”

“I don’t know if you realized, but the person who parried that blow meant for you at Sisheng Peak was my dage.”

“Don’t remember.”

“You saw his blade, Shuofeng. A sword made of darksilver iron.”

Frowning, Xue Meng sifted through his sluggish memory. “But… that day in the hall, the guy who shielded me was hideous. His weapon wasn’t silver, either, it was…it was—”

“Blue.” Mei Hanxue nodded. “He was angry that day, and very worried, so he put his spiritual energy into it. He doesn’t do that usually—my ge doesn’t like fighting to kill.”

Xue Meng said nothing.

“We actually take turns with the sword. I have a wood and water core, while his is water and fire. One day you might get to see three kinds of spiritual flow, green, red, and blue, but…”

He trailed off. Halfway through his explanation, Xue Meng had picked up his cup with a look of cool reserve.

Mei Hanxue narrowed his eyes. Xue Meng’s usual haughty air was absent; instead, his demeanor was decidedly chilly. Recognition itched at the back of Mei Hanxue’s mind—he looked like someone else like this, but whom? He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he didn’t care to think any harder. He approached life much like the thin ribbon of balsam smoke winding up from the golden censer beast’s mouth—lazy and indolent, drifting lightly on the wind.

Xue Meng finished off another lambskin flask. “Is there any more?”

“Yes, but you’ve already had too much. You can’t drink any more.”

“A thousand cups couldn’t get me drunk.”

“Is there something wrong with you?” Mei Hanxue laughed, but he did reach for more wine. “This is the last jug,” he said as he handed it over. “If I give you any more and my ge finds out, he’ll skin me alive.”

Xue Meng sipped slowly, his expression placid. He didn’t resemble himself. He swallowed and murmured, “You have a gege.”

“Huh?” Mei Hanxue smiled. “Of course. I’ve been talking about him for a while, and you saw him just a minute ago.”

Xue Meng’s eyes were unfocused. His long lashes fluttered like a butterfly’s wing as he mumbled, “I have a gege too.”

“Mn, I know.”

Xue Meng leaned back against the pillar. He’d sat for so long his legs were numb, so he stretched one out and stared at Mei Hanxue. The iciness in his gaze melted away, replaced by sunny brightness, yet

this glow still didn't seem like Xue Meng. He grinned at Mei Hanxue. "Hey, how does your ge treat you?"

Stunned by his transformation, Mei Hanxue wondered—was *this* how he acted while drunk? He replied, "Pretty good."

"Ha ha ha, you don't say much, do you? What do you mean, pretty good? Would he make you a weapon? Would he bring you a bowl of noodles when you're sick?"

Mei Hanxue smiled. "None of that. But he *does* help me keep women away."

Xue Meng blinked.

"I don't like seeing ex-lovers throw fits," said Mei Hanxue. "He handles all the ones I can't. He's much more decisive than me; he's a lot more clinical, and he doesn't waste time. But he's kind of boring, so he's reached this ripe old age without even holding a girl's hand."

Xue Meng frowned. "What's your ge's name?"

"Mei Hänxue."

"You two have the same name?"

"It's not the same character." Mei Hanxue smiled. "His is Han as in *cold*. Fitting."

"What are you guys playing at, doing this?" Xue Meng mumbled.

"It makes things easier in a way," said Mei Hanxue. "Some things are unremarkable when two different people do them, but seem mysterious if people think they're done by the same person. It was the palace leader's idea, so my ge and I have been switching places ever since we were little."

He lifted the lid of the incense burner and poked at the embers with a silver spoon. He added some more incense, the type meant to calm the heart and dispel cold, and kept talking. "One of us always wears a mask of human skin," he said lightly. "When he wears it, I act as myself, and when I put it on, he acts like himself. Before we knew it, we'd been doing it for twenty years."

"Isn't it tiring, living like that?"

"For me, not at all. It's loads of fun." Mei Hanxue smiled. "But my ge probably finds it exhausting. He always complains about how many spurned lovers I have—it's gotten to the point that he has to avoid women whenever he heads out."

Xue Meng didn't know what it felt like to be surrounded by women. In this regard, he and Mei Hanxue's brother weren't much different: Both had apparently reached adulthood without so much as

touching a girl's hand. But this wasn't something to brag about. He sipped his wine in awkward silence.

Mei Hanxue thought he was too drunk to respond, but then Xue Meng suddenly asked, "Why save me?"

His tone had shifted again, this time into something very gentle. Such softness was jarring on Xue Meng's proud face, more eye watering than the earlier brightness or the freezing cold at the start.

Mei Hanxue couldn't take it anymore. He sat up, reaching out with one silver-bell-adorned wrist and grasping Xue Meng's chin. Inspecting him from every angle, he mused, "How odd. It's you, all right. What's going on?"

Xue Meng didn't smack his hand away as he'd expected. Keeping his dark eyes fixed on Mei Hanxue, he allowed himself to be manhandled. "Why help Sisheng Peak?" he asked. "Are we very close?"

"Not really," said Mei Hanxue. "We played together when we were little, but it'd be me one day and my ge the next. I really only interacted with you over ten or so days."

"Then why would you take me in?"

Mei Hanxue sighed. He reached out and prodded Xue Meng on the forehead. "Your mom and dad saved my mother's life. She was from Suyab, and you know how many resentful ghosts there are in that place. She sent us to Kunlun Taxue Palace after we were born. During one of the violent ghost incidents in the city, she managed to escape—but she broke her leg getting out."

This new incense carried the sharp scent of pine. Mei Hanxue smiled. "It was a terrible journey, and she didn't have much money. By the time she made it to Kunlun Mountain, she was near death."

His face remained peaceful, the red teardrop pendant sparkling where it sat on his forehead. "Back then, Uncle Xue and Aunt Wang were on their own way to Kunlun Taxue Palace for the very first time. When they saw my mother in such a state, they didn't ask about her bloodlines or take her money; they just used the best medicines on her. They even carried her up the mountain after they learned she'd come in search of her sons."

Xue Meng listened in amazement. It was a breath before he asked, "Then—what happened to your mom?"

"The injury was too severe." Mei Hanxue shook his head. "She couldn't be saved. She passed shortly after…but thanks to Aunt and Uncle, we got to see her one last time."

A breeze gusted in, scattering the smoke and ringing the bells on the eaves, which tinkled like flowing water.

"For years, Aunt and Uncle told us there was no need to repay them, that it'd been no trouble. They themselves likely forgot the whole thing, but Dage and I never did."

Mei Hanxue looked up, studying Xue Meng with those jade-green eyes. These events had happened so long ago that there was no sadness in them, only gentleness. "That day, Uncle Xue carried my mom on his back, and Aunt Wang held the umbrella. They didn't want her to catch another chill. When they walked into the hall, they didn't speak of any official business of Sisheng Peak, nor attempt to build an alliance or curry favor with Taxue Palace. The first thing they did was ask if there were twins from Suyab here."

Pale golden lashes lowered, hiding those pools of clear jade. "I say this because it's the truth: They were the best sect-leader couple I've ever known."

"My mom and dad…" said Xue Meng, strangled.

Mei Hanxue hummed in assent. "Your mom and dad."

Xue Meng buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking. He was crying again; he seemed to have shed a lifetime's worth of tears in these scant few months. He wept, and finally resembled Xue Meng once more.

Suddenly, Mei Hanxue understood—earlier, his icy proclamation of *A thousand cups wouldn't get me drunk* was for Chu Wanning. His lamenting *You have a gege* was for Mo Weiyu, and his gentle *Why save me?* was for Shi Mingjing. Xue Meng clumsily memorialized them, remembering their every detail and every gesture, whether they sat or stood, whether they were annoyed or enraged. He'd grown accustomed to having Chu Wanning's stern coldness, Mo Weiyu's blazing enthusiasm, and Shi Mingjing's quiet gentleness always by his side.

He used to have a shizun, a cousin, and a dear friend; he'd thought this was a matter of course, so he hadn't treasured it. But in the blink of an eye, the storm had left him rootless and drifting, blown by the wind. When the rain had stopped, he was alone. Everyone else had disappeared.

Xue Meng drank this jug of wine, and one person became three: He cried and laughed, was cold, warm, and gentle. He loved them, and he had expressed his love respectfully, haughtily, and awkwardly. Perhaps he hadn't done it right. His love for his shizun had always seemed dumb and clumsy, while his love for his cousin came out more

cutting than necessary, and his love for Shi Mei had ever been mild and complacent.

The wine was gone. Xue Meng slowly withdrew into himself, curling into a small ball. The rims of his eyes were red. “It’s my fault,” he mumbled. “It’s all my fault…”

Come back, won’t you? I’ll never be proud or insolent, I’ll never be hesitant or neglectful again.

Xue Meng sobbed, pressing his face to his knees as he trembled. “Come back,” he wept. “Don’t leave me here alone.”

If they would only return—if everything began anew—he wouldn’t choose a title like “darling of the heavens” or the prestige of being the young master of Sisheng Peak. He simply wanted to tell them—*I really, really love you. I can’t be without you; I have to live out my life by your sides.* Even if it cost his spiritual core, or all the gold he had. He’d give up everything to bring them all back for one stolen moment of joy.

Seeing his grief, Mei Hanxue sighed and reached out to brush the hair from Xue Meng’s crumpled face. Yet before he could speak, an explosive *boom* came from outside the palace, so loud it seemed to shatter the clouds.

The earth shook beneath them, trembling as if some slumbering beast was waking in the depths of the snowy plain, its steaming maw opening wide to swallow the skies themselves.

Instantly wary, Mei Hanxue settled Xue Meng and readied himself to leave. He bumped into his brother, sword in hand, at the door. His brother brushed the canopies aside and strode into the room, his expression solemn and very dark. “Hurry to the main hall.”

“What’s going on?” blurted Mei Hanxue. “What was that sound?”

His perennially composed brother pursed his lips. “A mysterious array appeared to the northeast; it’s massive. I’m afraid Mo-zongshi was right—the Space-Time Gate is opening.”

Chapter 291:
Two Worlds Finally Entwined

TAXIAN-JUN STOOD in midair, his robes roiling at his back like black ink. He narrowed his eyes, his broad sleeves, thickly embroidered with ceremonial patterns, buffeted by the wind. The spiritual energy in his palm thrashed like a dragon attempting to devour the sun, tearing into visible fog and intangible time.

With a deafening *crack*, a bolt of lightning split the sky like the fall of an ax.

The world seemed to hold its breath. Then the waters of Heavenly Lake surged backward and the snows of Kunlun flurried in rage. The clouds charged across the sky, crowding out the sun and moving against the winds.

When Chu Wanning had come to this world, he'd torn open only a tiny crack; later on, Shi Mei had used all he had to pry open that crack and follow him to this world. Both of those fissures in space and time had been minor injuries, swiftly repaired by the power of primordial chaos. Even Xu Shuanglin's Heavenly Rift on Mount Jiao, torn open with the power of those five holy weapons, was only a temporary rip through the walls separating the two worlds. The difference between them and the tear Mo Ran created this time was night and day. Crimson engulfed the sky; two suns and two moons rose in the heavens, glowing corpse-pale and dim as they hung overhead.

From mild Jiangnan to snowy Mobei, from the far corners of the ocean to the ends of the earth, people stopped what they were doing and looked up at this terrifying sight.

In Wuchang Town, a lisping child sobbed in his mother's embrace. The mother kissed his cheeks and murmured, "It's okay, it's okay, darling, be good. Mom's here, Mom's right here."

In Yangzhou City, an old woman stumbled with her cane in hand, stooping low as she rasped. "How…how are there two moons and two suns… G-good heavens, what's going on…"

On Flying Flower Isle, Third Lady Sun frowned, standing on the shoreline with her arms crossed before her chest. She sharply commanded everyone to return to their houses and put out their lights, then had her servants bring all the homeless elderly, weak, and infirm to the manor for safety. She stared into the eerie skies, her eyes glinting with sparks.

The great sects of Guyueye, Huohuang Pavilion, and Wubei Temple looked up as well. It no longer mattered if they wished to believe it: The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death had indeed been opened.

Mo Ran hovered in midair, eyes red with bloodlust and shining with fervor and madness. Shi Mingjing had hypnotized and enchanted him over and over; he'd come back to life only to die again and return once more. His memories had been crushed to incoherency, his body puppeteered by a single cognizance soul. There was no sanity left in him, his mind even more volatile than before.

He was destruction incarnate.

Soon, half the world was shrouded in thick black clouds. Taxian-jun tipped his face to the sky and burst into laughter—but what was he laughing about? He didn't know; he didn't understand. His mind was a wasteland, and all that echoed in his heart were his master's orders.

He narrowed his eyes, watching the gleaming barrier beneath the storm clouds. A sneer pulled at his mouth. He reached out, voice low. "Bugui."

Bugui appeared. Taxian-jun ran his hand down its length, the blade glowing bright in the wake of his touch. He raised it high and brought it crashing down on the barrier between worlds.

All was silence.

Then a rumble shuddered through the earth; everything fell apart. At long last, he'd opened the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death—opened it, broken it, and destroyed it. Darkness descended. Taxian-jun's ferocious spiritual energy and the power of the holy weapon Bugui combined to ensure the rift was torn wide open, impossible to close for a hundred years.

He'd completed the mission. Taxian-jun stood in the screaming gale by the Heavenly Rift and turned to look back at this world. He paused, then turned and strode across the rift, into the realm to which he truly belonged.

When the wind stopped wailing in his ears, he opened his eyes. Before him lay a pale blankness. He'd returned to the world over which he'd declared himself emperor, to the Kunlun Taxue Palace of the past life.

"Your Majesty."

"His Majesty has returned. All hail His Majesty."

He stood in the middle of an overgrown plain shrouded in snow.

His retinue was rushing toward him, falling to their knees in twos and threes like waves breaking over the shore. They bent their heads and kowtowed before him.

Taxian-jun said nothing. His predatory eyes raked over the rows of cultivators wrapped in black cloaks. He couldn't see their end; the crowd stretched to the foot of the mountain. At their head was a doddering old man. The wind scattered his grizzled hair—Liu-gong, who'd served him for so long.

The year Taxian-jun died, he'd first sent Liu-gong and the other palace attendants back home. He'd thought everything had come to an end. He hadn't expected a grandmaster of medicine named Hua Binan to appear out of nowhere and bare his fangs as he made a corpse puppet of Taxian-jun's body.

But this revenant still had some emotion and lucidity; he was dissatisfied with the mute servants Hua Binan sent to wait on him, and only settled down once Hua Binan brought back those who'd served him in life.

Then, for reasons Old Liu wasn't privy to, Hua Binan disappeared from the world—leaving only the revived emperor, stuck among the living no matter how badly he wished to die. As time passed, even the stupidest observer could see that the emperor had always been a puppet dancing on someone else's strings. Old Liu was no exception. But what could a wrinkled old man with one foot in the grave do? He had no kin left, and all his friends were dead and gone. He could only take serving Emperor Taxian-jun to be his final mission, handling the emperor's daily needs slowly and clumsily in his dotage.

Thus Liu-gong's eyes shone with joy and sadness alike when he saw him again now, his expression the most genuine among the crowd.

Taxian-jun's lips parted. "Old Liu."

"Your Majesty." Liu-gong knelt and kowtowed. "Your Majesty, you've finally returned."

"You'll never guess what happened." Though he didn't realize it, he sounded like a little boy excitedly sharing good news with his guardian. "This venerable one saw him again."

Liu-gong blinked. "Chu-zongshi?"

"Mn. I saw him lots. This venerable one's core is repaired now, too, and once everything's over, this venerable one can—"

Perhaps Taxian-jun saw his own overexcited image reflected in the old man's rheumy eyes; he fell silent and looked uncertainly at

those kneeling around him.

Thank goodness. No one dared to mock him.

He pressed his lips together, reshaping himself back into someone ominous and powerful. With a toss of his sleeves, he said, “Enough. Get up, all of you. Return to Wushan Palace with this venerable one.”

They mounted their swords and flew back to Sichuan. The land that passed beneath their feet was abandoned earth, barren of anyone or anything. There weren’t many living people left in this world. Taxian-jun had long grown used to the state of things here—but after spending time in the other world and all its noisy bustle, returning to this hell on earth did feel strangely lonely.

That night, he opened a jar of aged pear-blossom white and drank it alone in the empty Wushan Palace. Since receiving Mo-zongshi’s spiritual core, he’d recovered quite a bit. He could do almost everything a living person could, such as drink wine or eat food—but a corpse was a corpse, no matter how enhanced. The taste on his tongue was scarcely a third as vibrant as it had been in life.

But still he was satisfied with his lot.

After a few rounds, he felt the wine go to his head. He lay on the daybed with a hand to his forehead in utter boredom, recalling past events. But they were unhappy memories and made a poor accompaniment to the wine, only soaking him in sadness.

He’d been avoiding these memories for years, but he feared them no longer. The two worlds were connected; all the suffering of his past would soon be erased. He narrowed his eyes, tangling his slender fingers in the tassel of the wine jug. “Chu Wanning…” he mumbled.

He rose and let his feet carry him toward the long-sealed Red Lotus Pavilion. At the door, he bumped into Liu-gong, who was just leaving. Both were surprised by each other’s presence.

“Greetings, Your Majesty.”

“What are you doing here?” asked Taxian-jun. His eyes fixed on the basket in Liu-gong’s hand, which held a feather duster and cleaning cloths, among other things. “Cleaning up?”

Liu-gong sighed. “Yes. I didn’t know when Your Majesty would want to return, and feared some things would rot or break if left too long. I’ve been coming every day to keep things tidy.” Old Liu paused. “Everything inside is just as it was. Please enter, Your Majesty.”

Taxian-jun was suddenly at a loss for words.

He strode to a bridge over the lotus pool, which bloomed year-round thanks to its infusion of spiritual energy. Frogs croaked endlessly from the depths of the blossoms with no care for the season. He cocked his head and listened for a while, remembering a bygone afternoon upon this same bridge.

It'd been a hot summer day, the kind of sultry heat that made one long to lie still. On a whim, he'd grabbed Chu Wanning and kissed him on the forehead.

At the time, there was little warmth between them beyond sex. This kiss out of nowhere held no trace of suggestive desire, and so Chu Wanning was rather startled.

The cicadas in the trees cried, and the frogs in the pool croaked their incessant chorus. Taxian-jun stared into those slightly widened phoenix eyes, engrossed, and said, "Since there's nothing else to do, why don't we play a game?"

Before he could say no, Taxian-jun put a finger to Chu Wanning's lips. "Shh. Let this venerable one finish."

Chu Wanning stayed silent.

"Let's make a bet. This venerable one will count to ten. If one of the frogs in the courtyard cries first, you lose, and you have to bring this venerable one a bowl of sour plum soup. If the cicadas in the trees cry first, this venerable one loses, and this venerable one…will take you for a nice little trip down the mountain."

Such a trip was an irresistible temptation. Chu Wanning obviously wished to ignore him, but over time, Taxian-jun had come to a deep understanding of his weaknesses. He knew Chu Wanning couldn't refuse such an offer.

The handsome man smiled. "Then, let's begin. One, two, three…"

That low and magnetic voice counted off. Both of them listened carefully for shrilling or croaking, but this emperor of the mortal realm had encountered a run of bad luck. The cicadas cried louder and louder from the moment he started counting, while the lazy frogs had stopped their song. It seemed they were going to forfeit the match.

"Eight… Nine…" The closer he got to ten, the slower he counted. By the end, it was blatantly cheating; Chu Wanning turned and glared at him.

Taxian-jun was far too shameless to care. Impervious to that glare, he stopped at *nine* and turned to Chu Wanning. "Do you think the frogs died?"

His question was met with stony silence.

“Why aren’t they croaking?”

Chu Wanning didn’t deign to respond.

“Hold on, this venerable one is going to check if they’re still alive, or it’s not fair.” He picked up a pebble and tossed it at one hale and hearty green frog—“Ten!”

With a startled *ribbit*, the frog plunked into the pond. The sound of that croak spread with the ripples on the surface of the water, and Taxian-jun burst into laughter. He dusted off his fingers and said, “You lose. The frog croaked first.”

Chu Wanning turned to leave with a flick of his sleeves, but Taxian-jun grabbed one fluttering hem. The cheater Taxian-jun was delighted; within the drifting fragrance coming off the lotuses in the lake, he grinned in the face of Chu Wanning’s fury and said, “I want chilled sour plum soup. Extra cold.”

“Do you have *any* shame?” said Chu Wanning, teeth nearly cracking as he clenched his jaw.

“If it can’t cool me down, what’s the point?” Taxian-jun poked his forehead. “Go on now; remember, not too much sugar.”

He must’ve been in a wonderful mood. By the time he finished the entire jug of sweet and icy sour plum soup beneath the beating sun, even the croaking of the frogs sounded pleasing to the ear. At dusk, he said to Chu Wanning, out of the blue, “It’s almost been three years.”

“What?”

Displeasure appeared on the emperor’s youthful face. “My enthronement. It’s been almost three years since this venerable one became emperor.”

Taxian-jun searched Chu Wanning’s eyes for any flicker of emotion but found himself thwarted. He wrinkled his nose, vexed. “You’ve been with this venerable one,” he said after some thought, “for three years.”

No reply came.

“Since that jug of sour plum soup tasted all right, this venerable one will bring you down the mountain. But not far—we’ll stay in Wuchang Town.”

The carriage was made ready, complete with bamboo curtains, cooling cushions, cups of tea, and folding fans. Standing by the thrice-

enlarged gates of Sisheng Peak, Taxian-jun ran his hands along the circlet of gold and jade on the white horse's forehead and turned to look at Chu Wanning. "Recognize it? It's the carriage you liked best back then. It wasn't taking up too much space, so I let them keep it around."

Chu Wanning expressed no happiness; instead he stepped onto the rosewood stool just as he'd done in the past and brushed the bamboo curtain aside to go in.

The servants stared in tongue-tied shock. They turned in panic to Emperor Taxian-jun, who stood bathed in the light of the setting sun. Their master had a dark temper and often slaughtered innocents for less. Chu-zongshi must've possessed impossible courage to ignore etiquette and step into the carriage ahead of His Majesty the emperor. It would have never occurred to those poor servants that Taxian-jun didn't mind at all. His eyes narrowed as he smiled in amusement. "Would you look at that? He still thinks he's the Yuheng Elder."

Just as he was about to follow him in, a woman's silky voice sounded from behind him, speaking gently. "A-Ran."

Chapter 292:
His Abyssal Heart

TAXIAN-JUN TURNED. Song Qiutong was dressed in all her gorgeous finery, approaching with a retinue of servants. Instead of pushing the bamboo curtain up to enter, he surreptitiously clasped it closed. "What is it?" he asked.

"This one was idle, and so I came out for a post-dinner stroll." Song Qiutong bowed, then looked sweetly at the carriage. "Is A-Ran heading out?"

"I'm off to Wuchang Town to see the night markets."

She beamed, her smile delicately poised between intimacy and deference. "Taking a carriage for such a short trip? You're not going alone, are you?"

At the time, Taxian-jun had still been indulgent of his empress, so he smiled and answered, "No, not alone."

Song Qiutong cast a fluid glance toward the rosewood stool still waiting at the door of the carriage. She had a woman's careful mind, and soon had her answer. Her face froze minutely, her smile becoming stiff. "Ah. Could it be you're going with Consort Chu-meimei?"

Taxian-jun could almost see the face Chu Wanning was making behind the curtain at being addressed thus. Resisting the urge to laugh, Taxian-jun replied, "Mn. That's right."

Her smile brightened, so dazzling it seemed to dim the colors of the sunset. "How marvelous! This one has been in the palace three years, yet I've only seen my little sister Consort Chu on the day of her wedding, and veiled even then. How lucky we've run into each other like this today." She smiled. "A-Ran, won't you introduce us sisters properly?"

Taxian-jun shook his head. "Consort Chu is naturally reserved, dislikes strangers, and is mute to boot. Better not."

Song Qiutong obeyed Mo Ran's every word—but how could it not grate on her? She'd developed a bitter grudge against this Consort Chu since suffering the humiliation of being abandoned on her own wedding night. Afterward, she'd overheard endless palace gossip about how the emperor had remained sequestered in Consort Chu's rooms until nearly dusk the next day.

"He was at it all night—you wouldn't believe the sounds I heard."

"I heard from the guards on night watch—they got to at least seven or eight counting on their fingers. His Majesty has *incredible* stamina."

One handmaiden giggled. "Isn't Consort Chu the one with the stamina? Seven or eight rounds in one night—heavens, she'll bear us a little prince soon enough."

But what stung Song Qiutong most of all were whispers like "Her Majesty the empress is so beautiful. To think she couldn't hold his favor on her own wedding night," or "It's completely unheard of. His Majesty doesn't show his empress any respect at all." That veiled Imperial Consort Chu may as well have slapped her soundly across the face, and the burn of it had only grown worse over the past three years.

In time, even her most trusted handmaiden became filled with resentment. "What kind of vixen is that woman?" she'd been known to hiss. "The little minx has got His Majesty wrapped around her finger." Then she'd turn to Song Qiutong and say, "My lady, you mustn't take it to heart. His Majesty spends so many of his nights there, yet we've heard no word of an heir. She must be too weak to bear children. His Majesty is merely having his fun with her; he'll grow bored soon enough."

Song Qiutong had forced a smile. Even to her most trusted confidant, there were some things she couldn't voice without shame. Over the few nights they'd shared, the emperor had always been careful to keep her from getting pregnant. The one time he'd spent himself inside her had only happened recently, when he'd run over to her rooms after getting into a huge drunken argument with Consort Chu.

She'd been sound asleep when the drapes around her bed were torn aside. Song Qiutong had woken to see those scarlet eyes devoid of rationality. He'd turned her over and ripped away her undergarments before she could react, ravaging her in a brutal show of force. In the midst of that frenzied torment, a hand fisted in her hair, yanking her head back, and a voice rasped in her ear, "Who were you writing to in secret? Do you care for him so much?"

As she let her body go limp, lost in the sensations, she abruptly heard him murmur as he pressed against her back, "You'll never see anyone…go anywhere… You'll only ever be this venerable one's Consort Chu…whether you like it or not…"

She blinked the humiliating memories away and composed herself, smiling prettily. "Your Majesty might not care for etiquette, but we're sisters, after all. I'd like to see her and bring her a few

humble gifts."

Taxian-jun's hand was tight on the bamboo curtain. "No need. Consort Chu has all that's required."

Song Qiutong had played every card she had. She said a few more gentle words to him, then watched as he stepped into the carriage and left with that irksome vixen.

Behind the bamboo curtain, Taxian-jun settled himself on the plush cushions, his stomach aching from holding in laughter. "As emperor," he said in complete seriousness, "perhaps it is not appropriate to dote on you so."

Scowling, Chu Wanning turned to look out the window in silence.

The burnt gold sunshine poured in through the curtain and painted thin stripes of shadow across his cheeks, pale almost to the point of translucency. Taxian-jun watched him for a while, then leaned in close and put his head in Chu Wanning's lap.

Chu Wanning stiffened. "Isn't it too hot for this?" he asked without glancing down.

"Beloved concubine, your tone is chilly enough; it keeps me quite cool."

At last Chu Wanning looked down at him, his gaze even more freezing than his voice. He was truly enraged. No man would willingly become another's concubine, and Song Qiutong calling him *Consort Chu-meimei* was an insult he couldn't swallow. Humiliation had reddened the tails of his eyes.

When Taxian-jun had made him his consort, he'd done so specifically to make him feel lower than a woman. Song Qiutong was the true wife, while he, the Beidou Immortal, was secondary, a concubine to a younger man.

"Are you angry?"

Chu Wanning chose not to dignify this question with a response.

"It's not as if this venerable one let her see you. What are you so upset about?"

Taxian-jun had thought to keep teasing him. But when the setting sun slipped through the bamboo slats and fell upon Chu Wanning's face, it revealed eyes so coolly distant Taxian-jun pursed his lips and fell silent. It was all so boring, somehow.

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the ride.

When they arrived at Wuchang Town, he purchased all sorts of things: sugar paintings, flower cakes, tanghulu, lanterns, whatever caught his eye. His shopping soon filled the carriage, but Chu Wanning only stared past the bamboo curtain at the bustle outside and ignored the piles at his feet.

It seemed nothing he did could make Chu Wanning happy. Taxian-jun couldn't help feeling frustrated.

"Forget it. We won't go back tonight," he said, out of nowhere. "We'll stay here."

He ordered the carriage driver to find them an inn, into which he and Chu Wanning—wearing a veiled hat—walked in together.

The attendant, who had been nodding off, woke with a jolt, transforming his yawn into a plastered-on smile. "Looking for a room?"

"One of your best."

Even with his face hidden from view by the veil, it was clear from Chu Wanning's physique that he was a man. The attendant stared in open curiosity.

"…Two rooms," said Chu Wanning.

Taxian-jun's fury finally snapped its tether. "What are we to each other?! Two rooms? Is there a point in trying to hide anything?"

If the attendant had merely been suspicious before, his doubts had now been put to rest. His expression of shock pleased Taxian-jun to no end. Once the room was ready, he gleefully dragged Chu Wanning up by the arm and kissed him hard before even closing the door properly, his tongue probing urgently.

Beyond the carved grapevines of the latticed window were the lights of so many family homes, but that light had nothing to do with them. He shoved Chu Wanning down on the bed. Alongside the suggestive creak of the frame, he heard Chu Wanning's soft question: "Mo Ran, what's the point of all this?"

Taxian-jun had no answer.

"What's the point of *us*."

These words were too cutting. Even now, the memory made his heart twist.

Taxian-jun opened his eyes. He stood in the empty Red Lotus Pavilion, and those events were far in the past.

An illusion seemed to flash before his eyes. The sound of torrential rainfall echoed in his ears; he felt like a ghost in the night,

peering in through that carved window. He saw the same room and the same people. The only difference was the storm outside, and the love he could feel in the bed.

He saw himself and Chu Wanning tangled in the sheets. It was dark in the room, but he was sure of what he saw in Chu Wanning's face: veiled desire, his eyes half-lidded. Limbs entwined with his own, ashamed and yet passionate. In the vision, he stared adoringly down at the man beneath him. "Tonight," he said, half imploring and half firm. "I just want to make you feel good."

He bent to kiss and suck at Chu Wanning's cock, and heard the gasps he'd hoped for. Chu Wanning's fingers sank into his hair. "Ah…"

Taxian-jun brought a hand to his forehead; it ached fit to split. The memories of two lifetimes overlapped and clashed, ripping into each other in an attempt to take control. Which was real? Which was a dream? He didn't know, and he was too afraid to find out.

He collected himself only with difficulty, then tore out of the Red Lotus Pavilion. When he arrived at the Dancing Sword Platform, he stopped and stood by the white jade railings. He stared into the distance, breathing hard. What *were* those amorous memories?

Were they from the other world's Mo Ran…?

He couldn't help thinking of Chu Wanning's soft and misty gaze, the way he'd moaned on the bed with his head thrown back. Taxian-jun's fingers tightened on the railing.

Had Chu Wanning *willingly* gone to bed with that thrice-damned Mo-zongshi?!

They were inarguably the same person, yet Taxian-jun's fury blazed higher and hotter, dyeing his eyes crimson. If those really were his other self's memories…

Hate and dissatisfaction swallowed him whole. Why? *How?*

After Hua Binan had dragged him back to life and turned him into this shambling corpse, all he had was the destroyed Wushan Palace and an endless, nauseating mess to clean up. When he ran in a panic to the Red Lotus Pavilion, what had he seen? Leaves withered and dead without spiritual energy, haitang flowers strewn over the ground, empty rooms—that lotus pond without its inhabitant.

Hua Binan had yanked him out of hell, but Chu Wanning's corpse had already dissolved into ash. Nothing was left, not one scrap of his remains.

He remembered stumbling to the edge of the pond and staring

expressionlessly down at its surface. He cupped a handful of the water. It was deep and cold, chilling him to the bone. He shuddered. The water spilled from his hands, and he sank to the ground.

Despite his return to life, what did he have left? He hated living more with every day that passed, but he was not his own master; he had no choice. He had to obey Hua Binan.

Later, Hua Binan found a fissure in space-time, but refused to tell him who had made it. That bastard cheerfully slipped off into the other world, leaving him here to slave away. His small consolation was the news Hua Binan brought him from time to time to keep him updated on the happenings in the other world.

He learned that part of his soul had been reborn there. He learned of Shi Mei, Xue Meng, and the long-dead Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si.

He also learned of Chu Wanning.

Hua Binan's letters were always brief. Taxian-jun despised his handwriting, each stroke so sharp it resembled a scorpion's pincers. Yet his letters became that living dead man's only hope. They were like a breath of air to a drowning man: With every letter he received, each time a new one came in, he would read and reread the words written in that hand he loathed several hundred times over.

He was convinced he'd gone insane.

At night, the servants ate their dinners. He liked this kind of busy atmosphere, so he made them all gather at the hall, just like before. He'd sprawl on the throne and watch them eat, and from time to time, he'd ask how the food tasted.

Taxian-jun had never liked reading, but he'd spent all these years alone. The long nights were dull, and his only pastime was reading those bamboo scrolls. Slowly, he too began to develop an appreciation for the descriptive potential of language.

Sometimes, when he wanted them to have some crispy scorched rice, he'd say: "Come, eat one of those guoba for this venerable one, they're mind-shatteringly crunchy." If he wanted them to eat spinach with red stems, he'd say, "Try a bite, the taste is unbe-leaf-able."

Motivating an illiterate to pick up a book was a challenge indeed. And if that illiterate came to delight in the act, perhaps the only conclusion one could draw was that he had very few delights left to him.

On this night, midway through their meal, someone came in with a report. "Your Majesty, the senior sage has returned."

“Just him?”

“He’s come with Pavilion Master Mu of Tianyin Pavilion. They say they’re preparing the offerings, and they will meet with Your Majesty once they’re done.”

Taxian-jun plucked a purple grape from a silver platter, his expression unchanged. “Then let them take their time. This venerable one enjoys the break.”

“Also,” the messenger continued, “the senior sage has a reminder for Your Majesty.”

“What is it?”

“Your Majesty must be vigilant over the next few days. The world is in chaos; *he* is sure to come.”

Taxian-jun’s eyes darkened. After a beat, he grinned. “Understood. This venerable one knows what he’s about.”

Of course he would come. The two worlds had combined, and tens of thousands of refugees were fleeing the effects of their merging. Mo-zongshi was dead, and Sisheng Peak had fallen. He and Chu Wanning were alike in one thing: They had nothing left. Chu Wanning would find him, heedless of his own life.

Taxian-jun wasn’t afraid. Rather, he felt a mysterious thrill of anticipation.

Night fell. Candlelight filled the palace like so many stars. Wushan Palace alone had its nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine lamps lit, their brightness rivaling the sun.

Summoning Liu-gong, Taxian-jun ordered, “Have them put out half the lights.”

It was too bright. Chu Wanning would have a hard time sneaking in like this, so he lowered their defenses.

Liu-gong went off to do his bidding. Taxian-jun stood waiting; when Liu-gong returned, he said, “Your Majesty, half the lights are out.”

Taxian-jun looked out at the dim glow filling the hall and was yet unsatisfied. After some thought he said, “Just put them all out.”

Liu-gong goggled at him.

Every lamp in Wushan Palace was doused, but Taxian-jun’s heart had begun to brighten. He could feel that Chu Wanning was almost here. He’d come dressed in white, glaring furiously as he spat those irritating precepts of righteousness—he’d surely want to exact revenge for Mo-zongshi.

The thought excited him further. He licked his lips, running his tongue over his teeth. Only one copper lamp remained lit in the depths of those gauzy drapes. It was the flame he'd prepared for the despairing moth that was Chu Wanning, to signal that he was waiting —waiting for him to fly over and seek his own destruction.

The night darkened. Rain began to fall outside the windows.

Taxian-jun changed into his most magnificent gold-embroidered black robes and carefully straightened the bedsheets and pillows with his own hands. He paced around the room, feeling there was something missing, then ordered his attendants to bring him a jar of aged pear-blossom white and keep it warmed in water.

This man heated fine wine, wore his best clothes, and waited by the bedside, staring out at the rainstorm beyond the window. Throughout, he never summoned so much as a shadow of Bugui.

But still he convinced himself otherwise, standing guard with his wine and his fluffed pillows, thinking murderously, *Tsk. Once Chu Wanning gets here, I'll show him a pitiless fight!*

Chapter 293:
The Emperor's Lament

BY MIDNIGHT, Chu Wanning still had not come.

Taxian-jun first became frustrated, then gloomy, then worried. Those lavish black robes swept across the golden paving stones. He paced back and forth, unable to keep himself from wondering—had something happened to Chu Wanning?

The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death had been torn open. Chu Wanning should've come to Wushan Palace in search of him, whether to learn the truth or attempt to stop him. Given the Beidou Immortal's temper, he'd come kick up a fuss even if he was missing a limb.

So why hadn't he come?

Is he sick? Absolutely not; he'd come even if he was ill.

Does he not know? If he didn't before, the transformation of the sky and the earth after the rift made it impossible for him not to have realized.

Or could it be…

Taxian-jun froze in place. In the dim candlelight, that black silhouette looked like a jagged-edged horror. *Is he dead?*

His nails sank deep into his palms at the thought. Taxian-jun clenched his jaw, and his whole body began to shake.

Eight years together in Wushan Palace, two years with his corpse. He and Chu Wanning had spent the greater part of their lives together—it was little wonder that finding even his ashes gone upon returning to life had driven Taxian-jun past the point of madness. He could accept Shi Mei's death, though he hoped with everything he had that he would return to life. He could not accept Chu Wanning's death and remain sane.

Night had fallen. The candle in that final lamp was guttering on its last inch of wick; wax had pooled at the base of the lamp, but the moth did not come.

The fear in his heart intensified, spreading through his limbs like ink on paper. He peered around the room like a circling vulture, pacing back and forth.

Finally, he collapsed back against the bed.

It was then that he heard a faint noise on the roof. Taxian-jun jolted to his feet; light and warmth seemed to rush back into his body.

His eyes burned with a terrifying brightness, only half hatred. Had he been handed a mirror at that moment, he'd have seen that his face was the very image of the spurned empress Chen A'Jiao as she sang "Changmen Lament" after losing the emperor's favor—miserable wives stewing in resentment, waiting for a man who would not come.[8]

He ground his teeth. Taxian-jun didn't wait for his opponent to make a move before kicking open the doors and leaping onto the roof in the pouring rain.

"Chu Wanning!" he cried, frenzied. "Did his death reduce you to this? Have you forsaken even your precious mortal world?"

He struck out blindly in the storm. Their opening blows filled the sky with the harsh clanging of weaponry.

"Haven't you always said to put the people before the self?! Were you so devastated you waited until *now* to come duel this venerable one? You call yourself Yuheng of the Night Sky? Is the Beidou Immortal so pathetic?"

His opponent finally spoke, voice muffled by the downpour. "What the hell…"

Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes. This wasn't Chu Wanning's voice. A knife of lucidity slashed through his rage; when his opponent brought his weapon down on him again, the hot madness in his eyes had cooled. Bugui flared green. He struck.

With a harsh *clang*, his opponent's weapon snapped in two before it could answer Bugui's glow with its own. Bugui's brutal strength had left it in pieces on the roof tiles.

"What rat bastard is this?" Taxian-jun was doubly irritated at mistaking the interloper for Chu Wanning. "Trying to kill this venerable one without a proper holy weapon?" He leveled the point of his sword at his opponent's downturned face. "Raise your head," he hissed.

The man slowly obeyed. Lightning crackled across the sky, illuminating his pale face. Taxian-jun's nose wrinkled, his expression dangerous. "You again?"

Xue Meng rose, hands shaking. Taxian-jun looked down and saw Longcheng in two pieces, shattered on the soaked roof tiles, and understood. He watched the sodden young man from behind dark lashes. "Perhaps I shouldn't say *again*," said Taxian-jun. "I should say…so it's *you*, dear little brother."

Thunder pealed like a drum about to split. Xue Meng closed his eyes.

“This is the first time you’ve fought this venerable one, isn’t it?” Taxian-jun continued. “How sweet. You’re much cuter now than you ended up being in this world.”

“Give me back…” Xue Meng’s throat seemed to close as soon as he started speaking, but he pushed through. “Give me back my mom and dad.”

“You already said that to this venerable one in your previous life.”

Xue Meng’s eyes flew open, fury and grief blazing in his gaze. “Give me back my ge!”

This time, there was a too-long pause before Taxian-jun scoffed. “Being a zongshi really is a sweet deal. All of you miss him so very much. But did he never tell you that he was me, reborn? He remembered all the sin and hatred of the past life.” Taxian-jun’s eyes glinted with frost, his teeth deadly fangs. “He was a *liar*!”

Xue Meng and Taxian-jun faced each other on the roof like two shadowed beasts locking horns. Taxian-jun’s fury grew, his features twisting. “That bastard lied to have peace in that life—he lied to have a brother, lied so he’d be surrounded by friends and family, lied to build his reputation as the great Mo-zongshi. He *deserved* to die. How was he any different from this venerable one?”

Through gritted teeth, Xue Meng said, “You two are *nothing* alike.”

Rain funneled through the grooves in the tiles beneath their feet. Taxian-jun barked a laugh. “Ridiculous! How are we not alike? In what way? You think he was pure? A hundred years in this rain couldn’t wash the filth from him!”

Xue Meng’s long lashes were spiked with rainwater. “You’re two different people!”

“Fuck your mother—two different people, my ass,” said Taxian-jun, cool and malicious. “Keep closing your eyes to the truth, then.”

Considering Madam Wang’s recent demise, these words were unspeakably crass. Xue Meng snarled, flame rising in his palm as he brought a spell slamming down on the emperor.

Yet not even the Xue Meng from ten years later was a match for Taxian-jun, let alone this puppy on the roof tonight. Taxian-jun dodged the attack with no change in expression. The spirit flame whistled past without singeing a hair on his head; he reached out and caught Xue Meng’s arm with ease.

Those purple-black eyes slid toward the eaves. “You two down

there better get the hell out, or this venerable one might just crush this birdie's precious claws."

The Mei brothers leapt onto the roof, one cradling his qin while the other drew his sword. Taxian-jun glanced at them, unsurprised. "You two live such interesting lives," he scoffed. "In either world, no matter what, you stand beside Xue Meng."

The older brother said nothing, while the younger grinned back at Taxian-jun. "Why shouldn't we? Does Your Majesty the emperor imagine everyone is like you—vindictive, pitiless, and cruel?"

The words struck Taxian-jun like a slap. Chu Wanning, Xue Zhengyong, and Wang Chuqing's faces flashed before his eyes. Vindictive…pitiless…cruel…

He forced his lip to curl in a sneer. "It seems you two are looking to die." Tendons stood out on his arms as he yanked Xue Meng's head back by the hair. "Xue Meng is at least the Beidou Immortal's cherished disciple. You two have no connection at all to this venerable one—aren't you scared I'll mince you up for dumpling filling?"

Xue Meng's temper flared at the mention of Chu Wanning. "How dare you bring up Shizun? You beast! Monster!"

"And why shouldn't this venerable one dare?" Taxian-jun raised Xue Meng up to stare into his rain-soaked face. He suddenly thought of those scattered memories belonging to Mo-zongshi: The moonlit sword ride on Flying Flower Isle, the rainy night at Wuchang Town, even the foggy mists of Melodic Springs… Jealousy sprouted in his heart like weeds.

"Go on," he said darkly. "Tell this venerable one what I should and shouldn't dare. Did that good and righteous gege of yours never tell you what Chu Wanning is to this venerable one?"

Xue Meng jerked in his hold, his eyes gone wide. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you didn't notice." Taxian-jun stared into his eyes, reveling in the feeling of pressing his prey closer and closer to the precipice. "The way they act around each other, the rumors people repeat."

Xue Meng froze. He shuddered in Taxian-jun's hold, which only pleased Taxian-jun further. *Yes—just like this*. He wanted to stain Chu Wanning, to make him filthy. Wasn't that goddamn Mo-zongshi always so polite and deferential toward Chu Wanning, so terrified people would find out about them? He refused to let that false gentleman succeed.

“Come, do you really not know?”

“No… N-n-no, don’t say it.”

“So you *do* know?”

Xue Meng shivered, his scalp prickling. “Don’t say it!”

Taxian-jun burst into laughter, his eyes ferocious and mad. “You do. You knew all along.”

“Mo Ran—!”

“You knew Chu Wanning was in this venerable one’s bed.”

Xue Meng stilled. Even the storm seemed to quiet around them.

The sight of Xue Meng’s hollow eyes and shaking body filled Taxian-jun with glee, so he tore into the young man’s heart again, harder. “Isn’t it funny? In the past life and this one, this venerable one fucked your shizun. In Wuchang Town’s Fengya Inn, in Melodic Springs at Sisheng Peak, in the guest room at Taobao Estate. Not just once but over and over again.”

Eyes dull, Xue Meng stood frozen.

“That reminds me.” Taxian-jun’s eyes flashed dark and cruel. He bared his teeth. “That big brother you’re shielding? He defiled your shizun right in front of you. Before you went up Mount Jiao, when you went to Chu Wanning’s room. You reached out and touched his forehead—you asked him if he had a fever.”

Xue Meng’s face drained of color.

“Can’t you think of any reason why Chu Wanning’s cheeks might be flushed?” Taxian-jun’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Why he had tears in his eyes?”

“Enough!”

But his fury was useless; it only goaded Taxian-jun on. “Behind the curtain, beneath the blankets, your dear gege had your shizun in his mouth. He was *having* him, don’t you see?”

Xue Meng’s face went red and white and then green, passing through every hue in between. He turned, sick to his stomach, and dry-heaved with a spasm. Gooseflesh had broken out all over his body.

The demon was delighted with the reaction he’d gotten. He laughed wildly, his eyes glinting bright. “How about now? Do you still insist your ge is different from this venerable one? He never told you the filthy things he did, so you thought he was—”

An earth-shattering *boom* swallowed the rest. Taxian-jun whirled to see flames rising from the Heaven-Piercing Tower; countless

faebeasts transformed into beams of golden light, arcing out into the downpour.

"What's this?"

The thrum of qin strings answered him. Like a phoenix's cry, the heavenly music threaded through the air, coaxing those faebeasts to take form. They dove, clawing at the air, toward a point on the ground, the wood-elemental faebeasts at their head.

Taxian-jun's pupils shrank. "Jiuge…?"

Without sparing another glance at Xue Meng, Taxian-jun sprang into the sky, summoning Bugui with a flick of his fingers as he dashed off in the direction of the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

The grounds around the tower had become a sea of flame. Countless Zhenlong pawns were fighting the faebeasts, and at the core of the clashing forces were two men, both dressed in pristine white.

One stood with his hands behind his back—Hua Binan, controlling his pawns.

The other glared daggers—Chu Wanning, playing his qin in battle.

At the sight of Yuheng of the Night Sky with his robes fluttering amidst the flames, Taxian-jun felt a wash of pure relief: Chu Wanning had finally come. Yet his relief swiftly turned into fury. Even though Chu Wanning had come, he hadn't come to *him*; he'd sought Hua Binan out first—he'd tricked him into waiting in Wushan Palace for so long!

"What are you doing standing there?" Hua Binan's spiritual energy was weak; he was relying completely on the pawns to keep Chu Wanning at bay. When he caught sight of Taxian-jun, he gritted his teeth. "Hurry up and help me!"

Taxian-jun's head ached, but he obeyed. He fluttered down and stood before Hua Binan, a dim glow flashing in his palms as the blade appeared in his hands once again. "Go. This venerable one will take it from here."

The fight had already taxed Hua Binan considerably. He was on the verge of defeat; Taxian-jun had arrived not a moment too soon. "Be careful," he said, relieved. "Once you've defeated him, lock him up. We can't afford for him to escape and ruin our plans." With a flash, he disappeared into the night.

Taxian-jun turned back to his opponent. "Chu Wanning, this venerable one *knew* you wouldn't be able to stand by. But I didn't think you'd go to him first, spoiling for a fight."

Chu Wanning's face was bloodless, his eyes shadowed. His expression was unreadable.

"Why didn't you come to this venerable one first, hm?"

He made no reply. Between him and Taxian-jun, it was Chu Wanning who more resembled a corpse. It was as though the souls in the Beidou Immortal's body had been stripped away, leaving only instinct to guide him in completing his final task on earth.

Taxian-jun rose into the air, and the two exchanged a flurry of blows. Eyes narrowed, Taxian-jun met each swift strike, watching Chu Wanning in the fire and rain. "Because you feared you'd lose?" He brought his blade down against the power of the qin music. "Because you couldn't face Xue Meng?"

Pain ate at him, and his movements grew more malicious. Every strike was impossibly fast, impossibly powerful: Mo-zongshi's spiritual core had made him unstoppable. He'd already closed in on Chu Wanning's qin.

"Or is it because…" Jealousy dripped off the words.

Jiuge's golden light interlaced with Bugui's jade halo. The sword came down and the qin shrilled; a sweep of Chu Wanning's fingers brought down an unbreakable barrier. With an explosive hiss of spiritual energy, Taxian-jun's sword came to a halt against it. Through that thin shield patterned with haitang petals, they met each other's eyes.

"Is it because…"

The glow in Taxian-jun's hands dimmed. When it flared once more, it was no longer the jade of wood but the red of fire—the spiritual stream most favored by Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning froze.

Gold and scarlet clashed, the sparks pouring off their fight rivaling the deluge around them. Behind the barrier, Taxian-jun's handsome face took on a gentle cast. "Shizun, is it because…" Beneath those thick lashes, his eyes were soft with plaintive sorrow. "You can't bear to watch me die a second time?"

Strings clanged as Chu Wanning plucked the wrong note—the light of his barrier dimmed, and Bugui slammed down. The golden veil shattered, disintegrating in a flurry of haitang blossoms.

Brutal spiritual energy overpowered him. Just before he plummeted to the muddy ground below, an arm reached out and wrapped around his waist. Chu Wanning knew he'd been tricked. "Mo Weiyu—!" he snarled.

Drenched by the sheeting rain, Taxian-jun burst into gleeful laughter. The curve of his lips betrayed a twisted satisfaction—at last, he'd gotten what he wanted. That flash of gentleness disappeared as quickly as it'd come. When he spoke again, it was with fangs bared. "Very good. You're finally speaking to me."

Taxian-jun gripped his jaw, yanking his face so close their noses were almost brushing. "If you hadn't said anything," he said, voice going low and silky, "this venerable one would've taken you for a mute."

Chapter 294:
On a Dark and Rainy Night

THIS WAS NO PLACE to talk. Taxian-jun dragged Chu Wanning through the rain and back to Wushan Palace in the blink of an eye. Xue Meng was no longer on the roof, but that was no surprise. The Mei brothers were too clever not to understand when to make a calculated retreat.

He strode over the threshold, passing from the tempestuous rain into the dry warmth of the hall. The lamp he'd lit for Chu Wanning had gone out, but Taxian-jun didn't mind. If the moth wouldn't come to his flame, he would deign to be the spider—eight legs scuttling as he whisked his prey back to its lair.

He shoved Chu Wanning onto the bed and stared icily down at the man, pale and silent beneath him. There was much Taxian-jun wanted to say, but when his lips moved, what came out was painfully petty. "So?" he hissed. "This venerable one has to act like *him* for you to even look at me?"

He grabbed Chu Wanning by the jaw, forcing those pitch-black eyes to meet his own. The skin beneath his fingers was chilled and clammy.

"Chu Wanning, you'd better get something straight." The words were squeezed through a clenched jaw. "Mo-zongshi is dead. It doesn't matter how badly you want him back; he won't return."

The words stabbed at Chu Wanning. Something seemed to shudder behind his unfeeling mask, but this reaction only fanned the flames of Taxian-jun's jealousy. Anger rose in him as he bent to crush his mouth against Chu Wanning's freezing lips.

Progressing from kissing him to undressing him was a familiar process. This man was as unyielding as any bone, but he'd gnawed on him for so many years—he knew better than anyone where to set his teeth to swallow him whole.

Chu Wanning fought back just as he had in the past life. Taxian-jun countered him easily as breathing, then grabbed the pill he'd prepared beside the bed and brought it to Chu Wanning's lips. "It's been a long time, after all. This venerable one doesn't want to see you unwilling. Go on, swallow."

As Chu Wanning knit his brows and thrashed, Taxian-jun's eyes went chillier still. He shoved the pill in with brutal force, making Chu

Wanning's mouth bleed before he succeeded. Then he bent down and caught those thin lips with his own. His tongue dove in, shoving against the pill that would render him pliant and pushing it roughly into Chu Wanning's throat.

"Mngh…"

A thick bloodiness spread between their mouths. That soft tongue pushed the pill to the back of his throat; unable to escape, Chu Wanning finally swallowed.

The instant Mo Ran released him, he doubled over and gagged, his chest working violently as he dry-heaved.

"Just a little pill and you're choking? Why didn't you spit anything out when you had your mouth on *him*?"

Chu Wanning went ashen. He turned, eyes wide as if he'd seen a ghost, and stared into Taxian-jun's pale and mocking countenance.

"What? You thought no one would ever find out what you did with him?" Glee and hatred melded in Taxian-jun's expression. "No one knows that dirty business better than this venerable one."

He peeled off his rain-soaked robes and climbed onto the bed. The rich furs sank beneath his weight; his broad and muscular back curved as he bent over the man under him, caging him within his arms. Taxian-jun's damp hair fell around them, splashing a drop of rain onto Chu Wanning's cheek. He drank in the sight. Eyes darkening, he lowered his head and licked up that crystalline bead.

Feeling Chu Wanning tense, he smiled. "How are you still so sensitive?"

There was no response. The Chu Wanning of the past might have flown into a rage and told him to get the hell out, but this man, hollowed by grief, only bit his lip. He refused to speak, much less curse him out. Yet his whole being was shivering, from the tips of his fingers to the very marrow of his bones. He despised the way this body betrayed him.

His discomfort conversely made Taxian-jun calmer. He watched Chu Wanning flush from panic and the effects of the drug and murmured, "You know, he never actually managed to get it in you, did he?" His hands groped their way lower. "Tell me," he whispered into Chu Wanning's ear. "Are you still as tight back there as you used to be?"

His was an impeccably handsome face, yet the words were pure filth. His voice was velveted with desire, while his hands roved unfettered over Chu Wanning. His caresses seemed to heighten the

effect of the drug; Taxian-jun gazed into that face he'd yearned for so desperately and swallowed, his voice husky with lust. "If you don't answer me, I'll test it for myself… Let's see if you've missed me there."

The drug was potent, and worked quickly. Chu Wanning's skin prickled; he couldn't summon the slightest resistance as Taxian-jun slotted himself between his thighs and propped Chu Wanning's legs on his shoulders.

Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut, his lashes quivering.

It was nothing like his previous trysts with Mo Ran. Taxian-jun had never bothered with foreplay and was tender with him only in the rarest moments. Chu Wanning could hear him undressing, then feel the heat of him pressed up against his skin—fervent, urgent, awaiting release.

Someone suddenly knocked on the door. "Your Majesty, the senior sage asks that you—"

"Fuck *off !*"

His roar was accompanied by the sound of shattering porcelain. He'd hurled a teacup in the direction of that ill-timed servant before they could take a step inside.

The door was instantly drawn shut. No one would dare interrupt anymore.

Taxian-jun ran a calloused thumb over Chu Wanning's lips. "See? It's just us, no one else. Never anyone else."

The storm raged outside, thunder and lightning howling a dissonant duet.

The emperor's bed in Wushan Palace, empty for so many years, finally welcomed Chu Wanning back. Taxian-jun studied his every reaction beneath him, watched his skin flush red from the aphrodisiac's effects. He felt like the fire that'd died in his heart years ago had come back to life this night. His Consort Chu, his Wanning, his rekindled humanity. Within the drapes of this warm and fragrant bed, they'd all come back into his arms.

"No one will disturb us again. Shizun… This venerable one's Consort Chu." Emperor Taxian-jun bent low to whisper in Chu Wanning's ear. "They say a reunion after long separation is sweeter than the wedding night. You and this venerable one have been parted so long—you can't say this venerable one isn't a dutiful husband."

He reached for Chu Wanning's hand. Slowly, he unbent Chu Wanning's curled and shaking fingers and brought them to his lips. He kissed them over and over, then pulled Chu Wanning's hand down and

wrapped his fingers around where Taxian-jun was already hard, aching to be touched.

"Mngh…" Taxian-jun moaned, intentionally loud and rough, bent on making Chu Wanning feel the humiliation of serving a man, bent on making it clear that the one on top of him was the fearless Taxian-jun and not the gutless coward Mo-zongshi.

Mo-zongshi… The thought of the adoration his other self had received from Chu Wanning inflamed him with jealousy, a blaze that licked up to redden his eyes.

Keeping his own hand tight around Chu Wanning's, Taxian-jun bucked upward into their combined grip. "Concubine darling, do you feel that?" he murmured, heated. "This venerable one owes you so many years of imperial favor—you miss it very much, don't you?" The jut of his throat bobbed, his low and raspy voice burrowing into Chu Wanning's bones. "Don't worry. Morning is far away…we can go as long as you'd like. This venerable one will see that you get your fill."

Such words were beyond ridiculous. *He* was the one who wanted it so bad he was flustered, so bad the rims of his eyes had gone red—so bad he could think of nothing but devouring this man, sinew and bone. Yet he couldn't resist slandering him, insisting it was Chu Wanning who was desperate, putting on this show of selflessly offering to satisfy his consort's desires.

Only Taxian-jun and Taxian-jun alone could provoke the last wisp of human emotion this hollowed-out Chu Wanning possessed. His red and teary phoenix eyes flew open, glaring back in dull rage.

Taxian-jun sighed in satisfaction. "It's been so long since you've looked at this venerable one like that. I would recognize that gaze anywhere."

He bent and sucked Chu Wanning's soft earlobe into his mouth. It was one of Chu Wanning's most sensitive spots; there was no way he could control himself now that he'd been drugged. Pleasure raced up his spine like a bolt of lightning. Chu Wanning was shaking, but his reaction earned him even wilder ministrations from Taxian-jun. He mouthed at Chu Wanning, his tongue delving into the contours of his ear in an unmistakable rhythm, wet and scalding.

Drifting amidst that blinding stimulation, Chu Wanning heard him mumble, "You should have an earring here…"

It was the voice of a tyrant suppressing his boundless rage, yet also the ceaseless sorrow buried in the heart of an abandoned dog.

Taxian-jun dropped a few more kisses on the spot where he'd pierced Chu Wanning's ear in the past life, as if to prove to himself

that this man had returned to his possession. Then he sprang into action, rough with need.

"Take it." He angled Chu Wanning's hand to press the straining tip of himself against that entrance he'd spent years longing for. "Put it in yourself."

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and tried to shake off his hold, but Taxian-jun was terribly strong—and he was bringing all that strength to bear now, veins standing out on his arms.

"Put it in," insisted Taxian-jun. He pushed against that entrance as if his only wish was to desecrate him. His cockhead shoved against that tight furl, slick precome easing the way. He remained there, neither pushing in nor pulling away, simply pressed up against him. Their breathing grew frantic; Taxian-jun wanted nothing more than to thrust himself inside, to make this man he'd missed so much swallow him to the hilt.

As for Chu Wanning, he'd already bitten his lips bloody. He panted, wide-eyed yet silent, refusing to obey. He stared sorrowfully at the man above him, and after a long beat, choked out, "Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran, this isn't who you are… This isn't you. It was this master… in the past life and this one…who failed to—failed to protect you. I've watched you go mad in two lifetimes, I've watched you die in two lifetimes. It's my fault; I did so much, but it was all for nothing. I couldn't save you.

"Why are you…" Taxian-jun blinked. "Why are you crying?"

Was he? Chu Wanning couldn't tell. The heat in him burned too fiercely; Taxian-jun must've been determined to reduce him to mud, feeding him such a strong aphrodisiac. Only after Taxian-jun spoke did Chu Wanning sense something hot and wet sliding from the corners of his eyes to soak into his hair.

Taxian-jun's expression went strange. That look resembled anger, or maybe jealousy, confusion, or… Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He must be insane, to delude himself that he saw heartache in those purple-black eyes.

It was pure delusion.

Yet in that small lapse of silence, Taxian-jun gathered him up and crushed him to his chest as if afraid he'd shatter. He said nothing, forced him to do nothing else for the moment. He settled Chu Wanning in his lap, then bent his handsome face and kissed him deeply.

"Wanning… Wanning…"

The kiss was sloppy and rushed, pained and maddened. Taxian-

jun wrapped his broad palms around Chu Wanning's waist, then pawed in frustration within the depths of the bedding until he retrieved a bottle of ointment. One that'd been well-prepared long ago —perhaps excessively too long.

Chu Wanning's ears rang. His scalp went numb at the sight.

Eternal Passion aphrodisiac.

It was the ointment Taxian-jun had used on him once before. Even buried as he was in his grief, Chu Wanning felt a terror that hummed in his bones—he'd experienced the power of this aphrodisiac in the past, and he'd already been force-fed one pill. Would this madman Taxian-jun really go so far as to…?

Chu Wanning pushed him away, frantic, but he had no strength left in him. "No… M-Mo Ran…don't…"

"Shh." Taxian-jun's eyes flashed. "This venerable one is different from that man. A little of this, and you'll understand this venerable one is the only one who can make you feel so good you start dripping. That goody-two-shoes, what does he know?"

He dug his fingers into the ointment. Ignoring Chu Wanning's protests, he pushed it into his opening.

Chu Wanning whimpered, the lines of his fiercely muscled back and waist tensing. Taxian-jun merely took it as encouragement to shove more ointment inside him, spreading it as far as he could reach.

"You've bloodied your lips," he said, working him open. "If anyone sees, they'll assume this venerable one's been bullying you." He stared fixedly at him, eyes dark. "What will they think then? Or do you want everyone to know the kind of slut you are—that the noble Beidou Immortal who looks so haughty and aloof gets on his knees for this venerable one? That this venerable one has been in him too many times to count?"

Chu Wanning's breath came in feverish pants. His limbs were locked tight, yet he couldn't stop himself from shaking.

"Ah, Consort Chu. This venerable one often wondered over the years: Would things have turned out better for us if you had been a woman? I favored you and you alone for so many nights… Who knows how many children you would've borne this venerable one?" Taxian-jun's fingers squelched obscenely inside him, while his other hand ran along Chu Wanning's weakening waist. He touched every inch of him, from the curve of his hips to the lean lines of his abdomen.

"That way, whether you or this venerable one—" Taxian-jun

rasped as he dragged his fingers over him, “wouldn’t we have come to care for each other, at least for the sake of our children? Instead of ending up like this.”

His eyes slid over Chu Wanning’s sweat-sheened forehead and tightly knit brows, down to his high-bridged nose and those lips pressed stubbornly shut. His eyes darkened. “What a pity. It’s no more than a daydream, after all.”

He removed his fingers, sticky with viscous ointment. Under the combined assault of both the pill and the cream, not even the purest saint could hold out for long. He knew precisely where Chu Wanning’s limits lay, and merrily trampled them underfoot.

Chu Wanning could feel something leaking where he’d been fingered open.

Taxian-jun moved with a dogged single-mindedness. No one could’ve guessed that, at this moment, the emperor who’d had his fill of all the world’s sundry pleasures felt like a virgin sinking his teeth into his first taste of forbidden fruit. He wanted to glut himself on the man in his lap, and irrationally feared that if he delayed for even a second, the warmth in his arms would vanish.

He was terrified.

He was terrified of Chu Wanning disappearing. So he spared no thought for anything else. He took himself in hand, painfully hard, and lined himself up with that dripping entrance. The massive head of him breached that tight heat slowly, but once past the initial resistance, he drove himself in with one powerful thrust.

Chu Wanning had held himself tense against the intrusion, but the instant that hot, hard length was fully seated in him, he went limp with a ragged moan. Little huffs left him as he sagged against Taxian-jun’s chest, his sweat-damp back gleaming in the low light.

Taxian-jun closed his eyes in rapture. The intoxicating pleasure of burying himself in this man swept over him like a tide. In that moment, he’d never endured death or loneliness; all the suffering he’d undergone was written off in a single stroke. His shizun, his Consort Chu, his Wanning—all belonged to him again. He was fucking him; he was taking him; he was inside him, owning him, humiliating him, cherishing him. He could feel Chu Wanning tight around his cock, sucking him in. Chu Wanning’s body loved him. Craved him.

“Shizun, you’re still so tight.”

Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut, but he couldn’t help the fine shivers that wracked him. His body had been set alight, his skin flushed red like he was drunk. He was humiliated and grieving, but

the drug had pushed all these emotions far away, while the thrill of Mo Ran filling him was spreading like ink on paper, trickling into his limbs.

Taxian-jun fisted a hand in Chu Wanning's hair and wrenched back, baring his neck to bite his earlobe. He wrapped his arms more tightly around him. The shift drove him deeper inside Chu Wanning, who drew his brows together, pain spasming across his face as he gasped for air.

"Does it hurt?" Taxian-jun was attentive to every reaction. "Bear with it for now," he rasped. "It'll be better once I've fucked you loose. Shizun, I'll make you remember how good you feel when you're with me."

Maybe the drug had rendered him delirious, or maybe it was because Taxian-jun had slipped and used a simple *me* instead of *this venerable one*—regardless, a ripple went through Chu Wanning's glassy gaze. Those eyes that'd stayed sharp and cold nearly half his life were somehow, in this moment, gentle. The sight struck the emperor—already far beyond hunger—somewhere deep inside. Holding him in his arms, Taxian-jun began to thrust roughly up into him as he sat on that great bed haphazardly strewn with animal pelts.

At first, Chu Wanning bit his lip and refused to yield. But as Taxian-jun moved faster and harder, as he heard the sound of Taxian-jun's ragged breathing, his control began to fray. Small, broken whimpers escaped his lips. They were soft and hoarse, but to Taxian-jun, they were as potent as the most seductive moans. He ground himself deeper inside Chu Wanning. "Louder—don't hold back. It's not as if you never moaned for me in the last life. Beg me to fuck you—beg me to mount you…wrap your legs around my waist, that's it. I'll come inside you, I'll give you everything…"

Chu Wanning's cheeks were red as blood as Taxian-jun poured an endless stream of filth into his ear, calling up those past events as if showing off heirloom treasures. His hips kept up a steady rhythm as he babbled.

Taxian-jun rutted into him with the brutality of obsession. After a few more frantic strokes, he lay back on the bed and dragged Chu Wanning down, settling him over his chest before catching Chu Wanning's lips in a fervent kiss. He canted his hips, sinking his cock to its full depth.

"Ah…" The new angle caught at that nerve deep inside Chu Wanning. Taxian-jun felt the man in his arms go slack as a stickier wetness dripped from his hole.

Taxian-jun chuckled. “Feel good?” he said, self-satisfied. “Isn’t your lord husband the best?” He didn’t expect Chu Wanning to answer; in fact, he knew Chu Wanning wouldn’t be able to. The emperor was pathetically smug. “This venerable one knows just where you like it,” he breathed. “You get wet like nothing else when I take you in this position. Shameless, aren’t you?”

As if to punctuate his words, he thrust harder against the place that made Chu Wanning shake. Reluctant to leave that clinging warmth, he buried himself inside and stayed, rolling his hips in short, aborted jerks.

This was where Chu Wanning was the most sensitive; inflamed by the drug and handled so roughly, all he was conscious of was that thick cockhead hammering the spot that made his skin prickle all over. Chu Wanning couldn’t think, his eyes wide and empty as the cries were torn from his throat: “Ah… Ah…”

Taking those moans for the highest form of acknowledgment, Taxian-jun wrapped his hands around Chu Wanning’s sturdy waist and thrust up into him, fierce and fast, sharp and thorough. “Louder, Shizun…”

Chu Wanning refused, clamping his lips shut, but Taxian-jun was hitting him right where he was most vulnerable, where he was slippery-slick from the ointment and more. Chu Wanning could only endure so much; his lips fell open like a dying beast’s, crying out in deepest despair. “Mngh…*ahhh*…”

“How is it? Is this disciple fucking you well? You’re so tight, Shizun… Is this how you take your disciple’s cock?”

Chu Wanning was overwhelmed and overstimulated, more so than he’d ever been in the past life; he couldn’t hear what Taxian-jun was saying. His red-rimmed eyes were unfocused as he sprawled helplessly over Taxian-jun’s sturdy chest, held down and fucked into delirium.

The ointment had churned into white foam, oozing out in a puddle of slick wetness, forced out where their bodies joined. The juncture of Chu Wanning’s thighs was soaking wet, but it wasn’t enough for Taxian-jun. His eyes so black they gleamed purple were misted over by desire, filled to the brim with lust. His gaze was pinned on his shizun’s flushed face, hot with agony and pleasure, as his hips snapped upward with all the strength he possessed.

He took hold of Chu Wanning’s hand and brought it to his abdomen, pounding into him in sharp jolts. “Look how deep I am,” he panted. “Feel that, Shizun? I’m all the way in.”

His huge cock split Chu Wanning open with every thrust, breaching him relentlessly with no sign of softening. Chu Wanning was nearing a breakdown. Amidst those humiliating sounds of flesh striking flesh, he gasped. “Ah…ah… M-Mo Ran…”

Mo Ran…

Mo Ran.

Years swept past his eyes, scenes of the boy growing into the man across two different lifetimes. Chu Wanning’s mind had unraveled; the consuming ecstasy, the intensity of sensation, confused him—he didn’t know which world was real, which lifetime had passed. In the clash of bitter pain and sweetest pleasure, everything broke apart. His world shattered and fell like a flurry of snow, each flake a reflection of Mo Ran: laughing, crying, kind, crazed.

He saw Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi’s silhouettes merge into one, holding an oilpaper umbrella, waiting quietly for him at the edge of the blizzard. Those purple-black eyes might’ve been good or evil; the snow fell harder, obscuring both the emperor and the zongshi—leaving only the slight figure of Mo Ran at the very beginning, in his youth, standing in the swirling storm.

Beneath the umbrella, the boy looked up at him, and his smile was filled with sorrow. “Xianjun, I’m about to leave… Pay attention to me, won’t you?”

For the very last time. Pay attention to me, won’t you?

After this battle, perhaps neither version of me will ever see you again.

Pay attention to me, please. When we first became teacher and disciple, I begged you for ages, but you ignored me. Now that we’re at the end of everything, now that I only have this broken body to entwine with yours, will you overlook my insanity and ignorance?

Pay attention to me. Won’t you?

“Mo Ran…” Caught in the vision, Chu Wanning’s heart wrung tight. By the time he’d returned to his senses, he’d wrapped his arms around Taxian-jun. “Mo Ran…” he sobbed.

Taxian-jun started—of course he started. Chu Wanning had never, even in those few instances where they’d been almost loving, held him of his own volition. He sat momentarily dazed, then swore and flipped them over, shoving Chu Wanning down on the bed as he lifted his legs and slotted himself between them to fuck him from above.

Chu Wanning’s swordlike brows drew together. The flickering

reflections in his eyes could've been the drapes around the bed at Wushan Palace, or the shadows in the inn at Wuchang Town. The inn had been the first time he'd ever slept with his own world's Mo Ran; it hadn't been very long ago at all, but now it seemed a century away. His head was thrown back; he gasped for air, as if indulging in this moment of stolen pleasure. "Ah…"

The sound was heart-rending. It was soft as a sigh, but it brought Taxian-jun's blood to a boil—his hips moved faster, his eyes filled with Chu Wanning's reflection. "Wanning…Wanning…"

Sweat ran down their bodies as if to glue their flesh together. They wrapped seamlessly around each other on the bed they'd shared countless times in the past life. Taxian-jun arranged them into all sorts of positions, as if making up for every night he'd missed in these years alone. He laid Chu Wanning on his stomach and drove into him from behind, then set Chu Wanning in his lap while he thrust upward into that welcoming heat; at one point, he scooped him off the bed and fucked him mercilessly against the wall.

This was *his* Consort Chu. He could have him however he liked, take him wherever he wanted. He would caress him, cherish him, torment him, and possess him in every way. He would make Chu Wanning his in every lifetime—no one could take him or steal him away. Not even himself.

As the night wore on, he pushed Chu Wanning down on the bed and wedged a cushion beneath his sore hips. He was driven by primal instinct—he wanted to breed his mate like any hot-blooded male, even if he knew it was impossible. He raised Chu Wanning's hips and held him there, kissing him hungrily as he rocked into him.

"Baby, it feels so good inside you…" Taxian-jun groaned, his pleasure building. His thrusts came faster and faster, his breathing more and more erratic.

He lifted Chu Wanning's hips higher. Chu Wanning was at his limit, his calloused hands fisted tight in the sheets. Those slender wrists were trembling. "Ah…ah—s-slow down…"

Taxian-jun was thrusting so wildly his cock slipped out. The sudden emptiness made Chu Wanning's unfocused eyes widen; he sucked in a ragged gasp, but it was barely a moment before Taxian-jun lined up his thick cock, slapping that round cockhead wetly against his pert ass before slamming himself back in with even more force than before.

"Ah!"

“I’m close.” Taxian-jun grabbed Chu Wanning’s limp waist, pounding into him with quick snaps. He dropped a kiss on Chu Wanning’s sweat-damp brow, the jut of his throat rolling as he gasped. “Baby, lift your hips a little higher, let me come inside you… Ahh…” Taxian-jun’s brows knit in pleasure as Chu Wanning clenched around him, punching the breath from his lungs. He pushed them both deep into the bed and redoubled his efforts, while Chu Wanning’s legs dangled around his waist, toes curled and trembling.

“I’m coming, I’m coming… Wanning…” Taxian-jun stared down at Chu Wanning, taking in his flushed cheeks through crazed and infatuated eyes.

With his last few dozen thrusts, each of them loud and messy, Taxian-jun pressed himself hard against that bundle of nerves in Chu Wanning and came inside him with a moan, releasing himself right where Chu Wanning was most sensitive. The two of them, wrapped around each other, cried out at the same time: “Ah—!”

They’d come at the same moment, but Chu Wanning didn’t have Taxian-jun’s unnatural stamina and had already been pushed to climax twice. He had little left to spill, while Taxian-jun’s come was thick and copious. He lifted Chu Wanning’s long legs to make him take in all his spend, and Chu Wanning’s low and raspy voice changed pitch at the sensation.

A long moment elapsed before Taxian-jun let Chu Wanning’s legs fall and collapsed on top of him. He could feel Chu Wanning trying to move, wanting to shift the cushion out from beneath him. He reached out and grabbed Chu Wanning’s wrist to stop him. Taxian-jun stared into Chu Wanning’s face, slack with the aftermath of his climax, a strange light flashing in his purplish-black eyes.

The enemy he could never defeat, the shizun he could never desecrate—the immortal everyone considered pristine, the man he yearned for but could never have…had been used so well his legs splayed open; he was pumped full of his come, his leanly muscled thighs unable to close around him. The feeling of conquering the powerful was impossibly sweet; Taxian-jun could feel himself hardening again, primed and ready to continue.

Chu Wanning was his addiction. The moment those stubborn, glimmering eyes, teary yet forever unyielding, so much as flicked him a glance, a wildfire would blaze to life in his mind and burn all the way down to his belly.

He grabbed Chu Wanning’s hand and dropped a kiss on his knuckles. “Don’t move,” he said softly. “Stay just like this.”

Taxian-jun hadn't pulled out. He shifted inside Chu Wanning, feeling the slick heat of him, thick fluid leaking from where their bodies interlocked. Taxian-jun swallowed in satisfaction, claiming Chu Wanning's mouth again. He kissed him, insatiable, as he mumbled, "Feel that? It's all plugged up inside. You better not lose a single drop. In a minute…this venerable one will keep going."

Taxian-jun hadn't lied. That night, he took Chu Wanning again and again. By the end, half the furs on the bed had slipped off, and the pungent mess of their spend joined the musk coming from the pelts.

In the early hours of the morning, Taxian-jun spilled inside Chu Wanning for the very last time. He caressed Chu Wanning's sticky abdomen and kissed his slackened face.

His shizun, his Consort Chu; the most honorable immortal in the eyes of the world, had been fucked until he was shattered. His bare skin, pink with arousal, glistened as if soaked in the finest pear-blossom white. Those sharp phoenix eyes were wide and glassy, his breath coming in shallow pants; the flush had reached the corners of his eyes, while his soft lips were slightly parted, quivering with each inhale.

Taxian-jun stared at that slick and trembling mouth and was suddenly reminded of how these lips, which had never shown him the slightest weakness, had willingly wrapped themselves around Mo-zongshi's cock…

Flames scorched his heart. Despite how many rounds he'd gone, he furiously shoved himself back into Chu Wanning's spasming body. Chu Wanning had been brought to climax too many times; he was barely conscious. He frowned and gasped purely out of instinct. "Ah…"

"Enough of that—you're still so tight inside." Taxian-jun chuckled. "This venerable one really is the best, right?"

The question went unanswered, but it didn't matter. Chu Wanning's body was honest, if nothing else. He'd fucked Chu Wanning senseless; he'd drawn every bit of sensitivity out of that formidable body, and now the afterglow of orgasm turned that sensitivity into a lash that humiliated Chu Wanning further. Every jerk of Taxian-jun's hips made Chu Wanning's brows knit against his will, made him tremble and shake.

Deep in thought, Taxian-jun reached out to touch Chu Wanning's face. Chu Wanning shrank back reflexively, but Taxian-jun grabbed his jaw and caressed his cheek. That elegant face was hot to the touch, the soft skin damp and salty with tears. Witnessing the

aftermath of such intense pleasure seemed to confirm something for Taxian-jun. He sighed and murmured, “Wanning. You’ve finally returned. You’ll never leave me again.”

Reflected in his purple-black eyes was a face in which strength and vulnerability mingled. Taxian-jun stared for a long while, then bent to press a kiss to Chu Wanning’s temple. He let out a breath of complete satisfaction. “Sleep.”

Taxian-jun tugged at the mess of blankets until they were both covered.

The night quieted around them. Taxian-jun sank into sleep holding Chu Wanning, a mirror of those final hours on Nanping Mountain, Mo-zongshi’s last snowy night. He, too, had clutched Chu Wanning in his arms until the candles went out and dawn broke.

The two of them were the same.

In the wake of that tide of desire, Chu Wanning lay like a splayed doll, every inch of him sticky with sweat and their commingled fluids. He couldn’t speak or move. He drifted, unmoored from his body, for a very long time, until his senses came filtering back. He heard the pouring rain outside the window and felt Taxian-jun’s slow breathing, and the weight of his embrace.

Chu Wanning glanced over with effort, then turned his head and gazed into Taxian-jun’s sleeping face.

For a flash, terror gripped Chu Wanning. He didn’t know when he was; the man beside him was so cold he feared he, too, would slowly stop breathing just like that young man in that snowy night on Nanping Mountain—that his heartbeat would slow and fade.

He realized he was shaking—but why? Taxian-jun was a shell, he was a walking corpse. But then why was he just like Chu Wanning remembered? Why did he feel and act in precisely the same way?

Taxian-jun would give him no answer. Perhaps even he himself didn’t know.

His panic slowly retreated, and his eyes gained focus. Chu Wanning fought for composure, and in the depths of his pain and despair, managed to calm his surging heart. The air in Wushan Palace was thick with the smell of sex. That was right—this was Wushan Palace. Not Nanping Mountain. And the man holding him wasn’t Mo-zongshi but Taxian-jun. The lover, disciple, and husband who’d died long ago… A walking puppet of dead flesh.

Chu Wanning swallowed the bitterness in the back of his throat and shoved down, excised, and suffocated all he felt. Facing the

annihilation of two worlds, in this most final endgame, the two lay in each other's arms. The room gradually stilled; everything returned to peace.

Their last entanglement was given over to the night.

The hours passed. A gap in the heavy drapes around the bed revealed a mess of blankets within, cast in flickering light by the flames beyond the window. The storm never stopped; it only raged harder.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes in the dark. The man beside him was still asleep. Perhaps it'd become habit after years of companionship, or perhaps Taxian-jun simply felt secure after force-feeding him that drug—regardless, he slept deeply and without wariness. His strong and well-sculpted body was still half on top of Chu Wanning, so heavy he could hardly breathe.

He turned to look at Taxian-jun's face. They had met when the Space-Time Gate had first been torn open at Mount Jiao, and he remembered the cold stillness of his chest then. Yet now, he heard a steady rhythm from within the man beside him. The spiritual core gouged out of Mo-zongshi's chest had reformed in Taxian-jun's as something like a heart.

He aborted that line of thought. Mo Ran was dead. In this world and the other one, he was dead and gone. Accompanied by the slow thudding of that heart, he told himself: *Mo Ran is dead. This is just a corpse without its souls. You know what to do.*

He hardened his heart. Light gathered in his palms—but it sputtered, unsteady, and finally winked out.

Chu Wanning stared silently at the man next to him. In the gloom, with Taxian-jun's eyes closed, the lines between lifetimes blurred once again. It suddenly felt so much like that rainy night when they'd shared a bed at Wuchang Town. That night, Chu Wanning had woken in the dark and leaned over to kiss Mo Ran's sleeping face.

No. No. Mo Ran was dead. Even if this man had a heartbeat, he was a corpse. Even if he could speak, he'd lost his souls. He was *dead*.

But then—how could he remember things that had happened after his rebirth? Why would the emotions in his eyes be so full and earnest, why would…

Chu Wanning shuddered, refusing to complete the thought.

He gritted his teeth; light again flashed as Huaisha answered his summons. It appeared in his hands as a golden shortsword, dazzlingly

bright. Without another moment of hesitation, he whirled, eyes shut tight as he brought the blade down on Taxian-jun's chest with all his strength.

There was a ripping sound as it sank hilt-deep.

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open. He was alone in the bed. Huaisha was buried in the mattress; that breathlessly sharp holy weapon had not found a home in the revenant emperor.

Rain poured down in torrents. One of the eastern windows had been allowed to fall into disrepair; the wind slammed it open, and the downpour howled into the room with a gust of frigid air. A bolt of white lightning tore through the darkness of the room, its icy light illuminating a terrifying face by the bed.

"And this venerable one was so sure you wouldn't strike."

Chu Wanning slowly turned.

Taxian-jun stood, leaning against the bedpost. A faint scratch crossed his bare chest where he'd slipped out from under the blade. He paid it no heed, eyes fixed coolly on Chu Wanning. "To think you would still try to kill me."

He swooped down with an awful swiftness and caught Chu Wanning's wrist. There was a crisp *crack* as he dislocated Chu Wanning's arm.

"Are you surprised? I'm much stronger than I used to be." Taxian-jun searched Chu Wanning's face, pale with pain yet refusing to speak. "You haven't seen me use these skills before, have you?" he asked mildly, then paused. "To be honest, there's nothing surprising about it. If you were the one who lived here alone," he said, hollow-voiced. "If you didn't trust anyone, and could never drop your guard, the only thing of interest left to you would be training, too. After eight years of this, you too would improve immeasurably."

The glow of Huaisha disappeared, its shattered shadow returning to Chu Wanning. Taxian-jun smiled, very faintly. "Shizun, once I learned all my attacks from you. Not anymore."

Chu Wanning said nothing.

"The years he spent reborn, I've spent slaving away. And now I've acquired his spiritual core." He ran a calloused fingertip between Chu Wanning's brows. "Someone of Shizun's caliber couldn't hope to kill me." At this point, he seemed to remember something. "Shizun doesn't know what I've been doing all these years, in this ruin of a world, do you?"

He spoke sweetly, never once referring to himself as *this*

venerable one. “I’ll show you now.”

It wasn’t far, the back mountain of Sisheng Peak—where the barrier to the ghost realm was at its thinnest.

Taxian-jun’s clothes had been entirely soaked in their earlier battle, and he’d later torn Chu Wanning’s robes to unwearable rags. But Taxian-jun didn’t mind. With a flourish of his long fingers, he sent off a spirit butterfly; Liu-gong came in with freshly laundered robes moments later. Through the drapes, Chu Wanning glimpsed the face of that old servant he hadn’t seen in many years and didn’t know how to feel.

“Your Majesty, the clothes you asked for.”

“You’re the only one who’d know where these old robes were stored. You brought them so quickly.” Taxian-jun’s voice was almost devoid of inflection. “Leave them there. You may go.”

Knowing Chu Wanning was behind the drapes, the old man’s hands trembled slightly. He badly wanted to steal a glimpse of the man he’d once served, but etiquette forbade it. He kept his head low and kowtowed before staggering off.

The clothes fit him perfectly. Of course they did: They’d belonged to Chu Wanning in the past life.

Mo Ran sat nearby, his long legs crossed as he watched Chu Wanning dress silently through the drapes. There was a haziness to his gaze; no one could have guessed what he was thinking—just as no one understood why Emperor Taxian-jun, who hated Chu-zongshi so very, very much, had refused to burn his clothes even years after his death. What use was there for clothes no one would ever wear again?

The tempest screamed overhead, black clouds rolling across the horizon. All manner of ominous signs had appeared, but Taxian-jun merely called up a rain barrier and enclosed himself and Chu Wanning. The dark and terrible storm accompanied their passage through the courtyards and pavilions, reducing the scenery and faces of the servants to an indiscernible blur.

“Your Majesty. Zongshi.”

“Greetings to Your Majesty, Zongshi.”

Once past Three-Lives Hall and on Naihe Bridge, the sinister red glow from the back mountain became visible. Taxian-jun had taken the lead, and now he turned back to glance at Chu Wanning, something like mirth tugging at his lips. “Sisheng Peak stands where yin and yang overlap; the barrier is more vulnerable here than anywhere else. You used to come here often to repair it. I wonder if

you ever sensed anything other than ghost energy?”

Chu Wanning said nothing, but his hands had tightened into fists within his sleeves. He had more or less guessed what he would see. Shi Mingjing had torn open the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, wielded the Zhenlong Chess Formation, and conquered two worlds. His ultimate goal was certainly nothing simple.

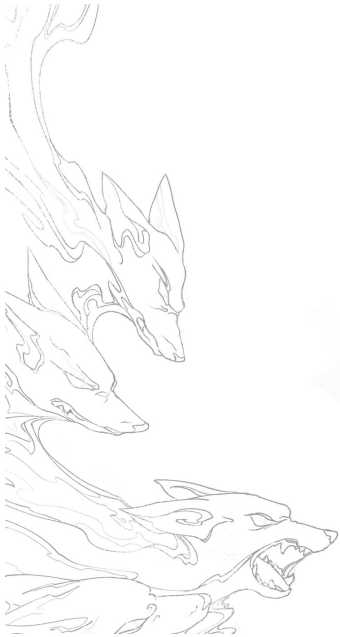
Even so, he remained silent.

“When you came to this world, you must have passed by many cities and villages.” Taxian-jun slowed his pace to walk beside him, his tone so casual he might’ve been talking about the weather. “Didn’t you notice the towns and cities were awfully quiet?”

The pair strode along the narrow paths of the mountain, brushing aside the overgrown veils of flowering vines.

Around the next turn lay the back mountain cliffs. Taxian-jun suddenly pulled to a halt. The stone wall behind him seemed to blaze with a furious flame, dyeing the mountainside red. He turned to face Chu Wanning, the ghoulish crimson glow lighting his eyes as he bared his teeth in a brilliant, bloody grin.

“All these years of this venerable one’s hard work have culminated in this. Shizun, please take a look.”



THE STORY CONTINUES IN

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

VOLUME 10

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

COURTESY NAME: Weiyu (微雨 / “gentle rain”)

TITLE(S):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / “treading on immortals”)

WEAPON(S):

Bugui (不归 / “no return”)

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Fire

Orphaned at a young age by the death of his mother, Mo Ran was raised in the House of Drunken Jade by the abusive Madam Mo and her son. Later he burned the establishment down, but was found by Xue Zhengyong and brought back to Sisheng Peak under the mistaken assumption that he was Xue Zhengyong’s nephew. Despite his late start, he had a natural talent for cultivation.

In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. He reinvented himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, and committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. Little did he expect to wake up in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all-new choices.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to a head after Chu Wanning’s death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning’s seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wandered the land

making a name for himself as Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning, “evening peace”

TITLE(S):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, “late night”; Yuheng, “Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major”)

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 / Beidou “the Big Dipper,” title *xianzun*, “immortal”) also known as: Xia Sini (夏司逆 / homonym for “scare you to death”)

WEAPON(S):

Tianwen / 天问 “Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life’s enigmatic questions.” The name reflects Tianwen’s interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 “Nine Songs.” Chu Wanning describes it as having a “chilling temperament.”

Huaisha / 怀沙 “Embracing Sand to Drown Oneself.” Chu Wanning uses it rarely because of its “vicious nature.”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator and elder of Sisheng Peak who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has three Sisheng Peak disciples to his name—Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran—and has claimed Nangong Si as a disciple as well. In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive, eventually dying as his prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran’s shizun and lover. After Master Huaizui’s death, he learns he was created from a piece of the Flame Emperor’s sacred tree.

Chu Wanning’s titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning’s weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons’ primary attacks, such as “Wind,” take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风 / feng, “wind”), courtly songs (雅 / ya, “elegant”), or eulogies (颂 / song, “ode”).

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng, “blind/ignorant”

COURTESY NAME: Ziming (子明 / “bright/clever son”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The “darling of the heavens,” Chu Wanning’s first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang’s son, and Mo Ran’s cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires. His weapon is the scimitar Longcheng.

Shi Mei (Hua Binan)

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, “to conceal” / 华碧楠 Surname Hua; given name Binan, “jade, cedar”

COURTESY NAME: Mingjing (明净 / “bright and clean”)

TITLE(S): Hanlin the Sage (寒鳞圣手 / “cold, scales”; “highly skilled, sage doctor”)

EARLY NAME(S): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, “little girl”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Water

Xue Meng’s close friend, Chu Wanning’s second disciple, and Mo Ran’s boyhood crush, Shi Mei’s gentle and kind exterior is a facade for his cold and cunning interior. In the past timeline, he faked his death at the Heavenly Rift and used it along with the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows to manipulate Mo Ran into becoming Emperor Taxian-jun. After Chu Wanning’s death, he traveled into the present timeline using the same Space-Time Gate of Life and Death that Chu Wanning created. In the current timeline, he goes by his real name, Hua Binan, and presents himself as a medicinal zongshi of Guyueye, while his younger self remains a disciple of Sisheng Peak to maintain their control over Mo Ran. Both the older and younger versions of Shi Mei secretly work together in the present timeline towards their shared goal.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

WEAPON: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang (王夫人) Wang Chuqing (王初晴)

Surname Wang; given name Chuqing, “first light”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

Xue Meng’s mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran’s aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect, having once been Jiang Xi’s shijie, and specializes in the healing arts.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔 Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, “to forget the past”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

A disciple of Rufeng Sect, the adopted child of Rufeng Sect’s chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright individual. Noted by Mo Ran to have been second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world, in the previous lifetime.

Nangong Si

南宫弼 Surname Nangong; given name Si, “to ride,” or “horse”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

Heir to the now-fallen Rufeng Sect. Died in the previous lifetime before Mo Ran’s ascension as Taxian-jun. Died in this lifetime on Mount Jiao in an attempt to save his fellow cultivators. Has a complicated relationship with Ye Wangxi, his devoted childhood companion, and was engaged to Song Qiutong before the untimely fall of Rufeng Sect.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, “carnelian”; bai, “white”; jin, “gold”

Nangong Si’s faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, “autumn, tung tree”

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bore a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joined Rufeng Sect as a disciple and was betrothed to Nangong Si. After the fall of Rufeng Sect, she was kidnapped to Mount Huang and killed by Xu Shuanglin. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Nangong Liu

南宫柳 Surname Nangong; given name Liu, “willow”

Leader of Rufeng Sect prior to its downfall and father to Nangong Si. Has a gift for flattery, but has since regressed to a childlike mental state after Rufeng Sect’s downfall.

Xu Shuanglin (Nangong Xu)

徐霜林 **(**南宫絮**)** Surname Xu; given name Shuanglin, “frost, forest” (Surname Nangong; given name Xu, “willow fluff”)

The embittered brother of Nangong Liu and former disciple of Luo Fenghua. After faking his death, he adopted the false identity of Xu Shuanglin, under which he took in Ye Wangxi as his adoptive daughter and posed as one of Rufeng Sect’s elders.

Nangong Yan (南宫严**)**

The ninth city lord of Rufeng Sect, Mo Ran’s biological father.

XIANGTAN

Duan Yihan

段衣寒 Surname Duan; given name Yihan, “clothes, cold”

Mo Ran’s mother, who raised him on her own. Once a talented

singer and dancer, famed as one of the twin goddesses of the riverbanks, she eventually had to turn to performing on the streets to earn money to keep Mo Ran and herself fed. Compassionate and kind despite the misery of her circumstances, she is described by Mo Ran as his first moral "lighthouse."

Xun Fengruo

荀风弱 Surname Xun; given name Fengruo, "wind, delicate"

A musician famed as one of the twin goddesses of the riverbanks. She had a rivalry-turned-camaraderie with Duan Yihan, Mo Ran's mother.

GUYUEYE SECT

Jiang Xi

姜曦 Surname Jiang; given name Xi, "dawn, sunshine"

COURTESY NAME: Yechen (夜沉 / "deep night")

The aloof, haughty sect leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world. Despite his age, he looks to be in his twenties due to his cultivation method. His weapon is the longsword Xuehuang.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue (Younger)

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "to hold, snow"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Mei Hänxue (Older)

梅寒雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "icy, snow"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hänxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including fending off lady cultivators, and is an appreciator of peace and quiet. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Translators' note: In the original Chinese, the names of the Mei twins are pronounced identically when spoken aloud while remaining distinguishable in the written text, as they use different characters for "Han." We have opted to mark the elder twin's name with a diaeresis —"Hänxue"—to maintain the distinction between their written names for readers of the English text.

Master Xuanjing (玄镜大师)

Abbot of Wubei Temple.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, "to bear, to think of"; zui, "sins, guilt, blame"

A monk of Wubei Temple. Originally Xiaoman, a young man of Lin'an who betrayed his fellow humans and caused the death of Chu Lan hundreds of years before the start of Husky's events. He has lived his life attempting to atone ever since, up to and including creating Chu Wanning from a piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree to raise him as a body to house Chu Lan's souls. When Chu Wanning dies during a Heavenly Rift, Master Huaizui wields Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring him back from the underworld.

Ma Yun (马芸)

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third richest person in the cultivation world.

Liu-gong (刘公)

An elderly servant of Taxian-jun in his previous lifetime.

Mu Yanli

木烟离 Surname Mu; given name Yanli, "smoke, to leave

behind”

The reclusive pavilion master of Tianyin Pavilion, as cold, competent, and commanding as she is beautiful.

Zhen Congming

甄淙明 Surname Zhen; given name Congming, “water gurgling, bright/clever”

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase “very smart.”

Huang Xiaoyue

黃啸月 Surname Huang; given name Xiaoyue, “whistle, moon”

Previous sect leader of Jiangdong Hall who died on Mount Jiao.

Song Qiao (Jade-Hearted Lord)

宋乔 **(化碧之尊)** Surname Song; given name Qiao, “tall” (hua bi zhi zun, “loyal ruler whose blood has turned to green jade”)

COURTESY NAME: Xingyi (星移, “shifting stars”)

The last zongshi from the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast tribe, who subdued a phoenix descended from the Vermilion Bird hundreds of years ago.

Ming Yuelou

明月楼 Surname Ming; given name Yuelou, “moon, building”

The leader of Taxue Palace, and an old friend of Xue Zhengyong’s.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest. It’s where Sisheng Peak imprisons the spirits and demons they exorcise.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭)

Chu Wanning’s residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it “Red Lotus Hell” or the “Pavilion of Broken Legs.” In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun’s spiritual energy.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, “honoring Confucian ideals”

A prosperous sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern-day Shandong Province. Its seventy-two cities were burned to the ground by Taxian-jun in his lifetime, and by Xu Shuanglin in the present timeline.

Mount Jiao (蛟山)

One of the four great evil mountains of the cultivation realm, a relic of its bloody past. It also serves as the burial grounds for Rufeng disciples, earning it the moniker of Rufeng Sect’s heroes’ tomb.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, “stepping softly across snow”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Heavenly Lake (天池)

A lake in Kunlun Taxue Palace’s mountainous territory.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, “a lonely moon in the night sky”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Dragonblood Mountain (龙血山)

A mountain near Wubei Temple.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

桃宝山庄Taobao, “Peach Treasure”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

江东堂 Jiangdong, the south bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Qi Liangji became their new sect leader after the death of her husband, the previous sect leader.

Huohuang Pavilion

火凰阁 Huohuang, “fire, phoenix”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm.

Shangqing Pavilion

上清阁 Shangqing, “towards heaven”

One of the ten great sects, located in the upper cultivation realm. Shangqing Pavilion and Wubei Temple are the only two sects of the ten great sects to explicitly forbid sexual relationships and dual cultivation.

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, “heavenly/divine sound”

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

OTHER

House of Drunken Jade (醉玉楼)

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events of the current timeline.

Nanping Mountain (南屏山)

A secluded mountain far from the rest of the cultivation world.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; "zizi" is a regional variant of "jieije."

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

shizhu: "Benefactor, alms-giver." A respectful term used by Buddhist and Taoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender-neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one's master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shigong: Husband of shizun/shifu.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/ Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to “Mister.” Often used for teachers.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one’s father; sometimes a “godfather.”

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in “de” in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Husky*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hu**rt

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ **W**ǎ**nníng**

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of

both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Terminology

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information.*)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like “phoenix eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/ shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (妖 / yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as “demons” or “monsters,” though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”) in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators’ spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning’s elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crab apple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The "miles" and "inches" in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (里 / *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (尺 / *cun*) is approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (寸 / *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body,

like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (苍龙 / canglong, or 青龙 / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Ebon Tortoise: The Ebon Tortoise (玄武 / xuanwu) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction North, the element of water, and the season of winter. It is usually depicted as a tortoise entwined with a serpent.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Jiao dragon: A type of dragon in Chinese mythology, often said to be aquatic or river-dwelling, and able to control rain and floods.

Nüwa: A goddess in Chinese mythology, said to have been the one who created humanity by shaping the first humans out of clay. A prominent figure in Chinese mythology, even outside creation myths.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (凤凰 / “phoenix”), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Vermilion Bird: The Vermilion Bird (朱雀上神) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal

direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the

donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms —such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained.

(See Name Guide for more information)

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal with Hua Binan's wretched tyranny after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"

Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"

Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

"He Who Failed as a People's Teacher"

No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]

2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi-Roasting Writing Contest

"Twenty Years on the Forbes Cultivation World's Billionaires Ranking and Still Going Strong: A Biography of Jiang Xi"

[redacted]

[redacted]

Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"

Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

Footnotes

Chapter 276: I'm Coming to the Grave with You

[1] Qu Yuan and Yue Fei are historical figures remembered for upright principles who died after being framed by political enemies. Qu Yuan was a poet and statesman from the Warring States period who composed many works in Verses of Chu, from which Chu Wanning's weapons take their names. While exiled, he died by suicide, walking into the Miluo River. Yue Fei was a celebrated general from the Southern Song dynasty. The emperor saw Yue Fei's military success as a threat, so he recalled Yue Fei on false charges. In some histories, Yue Fei was ambushed and murdered at Fengbo Pavilion on his way back to the capital.

Chapter 280: Disputes of Good and Evil

[2] Quote from the poem "Ode to the Plum Blossom" by the Song dynasty poet Lu You.

Chapter 286: The Lover and the Lost

[3] The goddess of sex, longevity, and war.

[4] From the third part of the poem "Elegy in Three Parts" by Tang dynasty poet Yuan Zhen.

[5] Reference to "Sent North in Evening Rain" by Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin, a poem about loneliness and sorrow.

Chapter 287: Inescapable Fate

[6] Referencing "To Huang Jifu" by the Song dynasty poet Huang Tingjian.

Chapter 288: The Zongshi and the Emperor

[7] Hei Wuchang and Bai Wuchang are entities whose names mean "Black Impermanence" and "White Impermanence," respectively. They dress in their respective colors and serve Lord Yanluo, the Supreme Judge of the Underworld, collecting deceased souls for judgment.

[8] "Changmen Lament" is a qin piece based on a series of poems named after the palace of Empress Chen. It describes her misery upon losing favor with Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty.

Hell Is Too Cold
Mo Ran awakens in prison at Tianyin Pavilion, the subject of scorn and ridicule as he awaits trial for his crimes. At worst, his souls will be torn apart, never to reenter the cycle of reincarnation. At best, Tianyin Pavilion will dig out his shattered spiritual core in the name of justice.
Far away on Mount Jiao, Chu Wanning, too, has awakened with the memories of two lifetimes and more: The truth of how Mo Ran became infected with the curse that poisoned his heart in the past lifetime. Distraught, he rushes to Mo Ran's rescue, hoping to clear his name in time to save him.
As the cultivation realm assembles to decide Mo Ran's fate, Hua Binan and Taxian-jun wait in the shadows for the final piece of their nightmarish plan to fall into place—a plan that, if allowed to come to fruition, stands to sunder two worlds.
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